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ABSTRACT

The collection of discussion papers from an October 1995 conference in South Africa focuses on the implications of the country's new National Qualifications Framework (NQF), a policy initiative for reform and renewal of post-apartheid education, for language teaching and testing. Papers include: "Introductory Comments: Language Assessment and the NQF" (Edward French, Ihron Rensburg); "The NQF: Challenges in the Language Field" (Schalk Engelbrecht, Gerard Schuring); "Language Education and the National Qualifications Framework: An Introduction to Competency-Based Education and Training" (Daryl McLean); "Standards and Levels in Language Assessment" (Paul Musker, Sebolelo Nomvete); "The Assessment of Language Outcomes in ABET: Implications of an Approach" (Elizabeth Burroughs, Melissa Vieyra-King, Gabi Witthaus); "Issues Raised in Plenary: Summary" (conference participants); "Summing Up: Drawing the Issues Together: In the Context of Language Education Policy" (Neville Alexander); "Summing Up: Drawing the Issues Together: In the Context of the NQF" (Jeanne Gamble); and "Concluding Comments" (Khetsi Lehoko). A list of participants is appended. (MSE)

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Language Assessment and the National Qualifications Framework

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INDEPENDENT EXAMINATIONS BOARD

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT AND THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS: 12 OCTOBER 1995

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PRETORIA: HSRC

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
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PREAMBLE

Key features of the proposed National Qualifications Framework (NQF), together with the striving for curriculum renewal, pose a range of tough challenges around the structuring of the assessment of language development.

The aim of the conference was to explore language policy in relation to the NQF proposals and their implications for implementation of language education for schooling, ABE and training. The conference was not seen in any way as a policy-setting event, but as a platform for opening up informed debate on language and the NQF.

Structuring the proceedings

Papers published in these proceedings are primarily discussion documents rather than formal academic papers. Questions regarding these must please be directed to the authors themselves and not to the editors. Points raised from the floor in plenary have also been recorded. Because discussions in each session tended to overlap and cross refer, it was decided to group comments into thematic categories rather than record them in question-and-answer format in relation to each paper.

Categories for discussion points are as follows:

- Outcomes-based education & training
- Assessment and curriculum
- Language education
- Language paradigms
- The National Qualifications Framework

Melissa Vieyra-King (IEB)
Karen Calteaux (HSRC)

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS: LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT AND THE NQF

Edward French and Ihron Rensburg

Independent Examinations Board and Department of Education

In opening this conference we would like to congratulate you all on your involvement in an area of concern that is at the heart of national commitments to change and renewal.

For while the subject of this conference may look at first sight like a fairly narrow professional matter, the conference actually focuses on the challenges of co-ordinating two of the boldest initiatives in nation building to be adopted by the Government of National Unity: the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the national language policy of giving equal recognition to the countrys eleven major languages.

At present the government is preoccupied with many urgent issues which claim the public's attention. Creating jobs and housing and combatting crime seem to be the overarching priorities. Yet it would not be surprising if social historians of the future, looking back on this momentous decade, were to attribute the creation of a winning nation to the achievements brought about through the two policy areas which this conference brings together. This optimistic scenario will depend, of course, on getting many other things right, and particularly on carrying through the aims and ideals of qualifications and language policy into effective implementation. At present both areas of policy offer us great promise. It is up to us to make them work. If you arent already aware of the huge challenges of making them work, there is no doubt that you will be by the end of today.

The National Qualifications Framework and official language policy share some very important new features. They are both central to the spirit and intentions of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. They are both *frameworks*, based on extensive participation, consultation and research. Instead of being highly prescriptive and inflexible sets of laws and rules, they are designed to create unity in a way that gives great scope for building on the strengths of our diversity. Ideally, different pathways to development, different local histories, conditions and needs can be accommodated and nurtured within these frameworks. At the same time systems must be in place to ensure that national practices and standards are principled and coherent. Without such systems there would be no way of ensuring a just and developmental allocation of social and state resources to these fields.

The National Qualifications Framework is both different from and much more than a streamlined plan for the bureaucratic regulation of education and training in

South Africa. Compared with the scarcely intelligible, incoherent sets of rules, practices and interests governing qualifications in South Africa at present, the NQF is indeed streamlined. It has an inescapable element of bureaucratic regulation – though nothing like the labyrinth that we have inherited from the past. But above all, it differs from the past systems which emphasised a punitive, gatekeeping view of qualifications. By contrast, the NQF aims to use qualifications to open up spaces in which vital, varied, rich and relevant learning can be recognised, nurtured and linked together across a wide range of contexts. In short, the NQF is not so much a new system for organising learning as a new way of understanding and using knowledge in our society.

In the same way national language policy aims to recognise and nurture language diversity, work against the dominance of certain languages, and promote communication and learning, personal growth and productivity through different languages in one national community, using diversity as a resource rather than an inhibition.

To turn the high aspirations represented by the NQF and language policy into reality is going to be enormously difficult. The wonderful opportunities which these new policies offer could all too easily turn to dust if they are put into practice in thoughtless ways. The aims and principles which underlie them could be forgotten in the tricky process of implementation. For this not to happen we need to shed as much light as possible on the challenges involved.

This is the first conference to begin to look at questions around language policy, standards and qualifications. The conference is very deliberately aimed at developing insight and understanding of some of the approaches underlying the NQF. It is not intended either to come to conclusions about policy or to teach the participants how to work within a final set of rules, or even to make proposals on language qualifications. If it tried to do this it would miss the more important stage of developing a high level conceptual grasp of the implications of the future interaction of the NQF and national language policy.

The conference has its immediate origins in the Independent Examination Board's (IEB) work in the development of outcomes-based assessment for adult education. Adult education offered an ideal area in which to start working on assessment models which would give expression to emergent thinking around national standards for education and training. The field of adult education had operated mainly as non-formal education. This had created problems in terms of purpose, recognition and coherent achievement and there was a growing need for a qualifications approach which would match the contexts, values and innovations of adult education. The advantage of the situation, compared with formal education, lay in the lack of a complex inherited system of assessment and qualification.

Three years ago the IEB, drawing on the resources and contributions of a broad array of stakeholders and role-players, set about designing assessment models and

practices for adult education. To start with they worked only in English. At the beginning of 1995 they started facing the challenges of relating these to a continuum of development in and across languages. The questions and problems raised by the endeavour were tough, and the attempts to arrive at working solutions proved intensely controversial. On an experimental basis the IEB adopted an approach which has been dubbed the 'common-outcomes' approach. In this approach the national standards (outcomes plus assessment criteria) at each level for any language are the same.

The heated debates around this model led to an awareness that there is a long way to go before the issues which they raise are clarified. The questions involved range well beyond the boundaries of adult education. They are central to future policy for formal education at all levels, and they impact on the world of training and on the unfolding of practices in the new area of the recognition of prior learning (RPL). How far can one separate curriculum models from assessment models when it comes to language development, and what is the effect of separating them? How meaningful and useful are notions like 'mother-tongue', 'foreign' and 'other' language, 'first, second and third languages', 'language of wider communication', 'language for special purposes', especially in the peculiar context of South Africa? Even if these notions should be used in constructing curricula, is the idea of a universal set of assessment stages for language development useful — or not? Should the distinction between 'learning a language' and 'the language of learning' play an important part in the assessment model as well as in the curriculum? Can we create a coherent set of national standards for the assessment of language development without building the contextualisation of that development into the assessment? If there is an inescapable contradiction here can we anticipate its consequences, and how might we deal with them? Which policies in terms of all of these questions will best fit with the highest national education and language policy goals?

Perhaps the most difficult question of all is the underlying research question: 'How do we adequately answer these questions?' Which questions are amenable to resolution through prior argument? Which need a decision or a decree? If certain decisions are taken, how do we ensure that their impact is thoroughly monitored so that we are better informed for future decisions?

The aim of this conference is to initiate discussion on these kinds of questions. The issues to be dealt with could easily be spread over a week rather than one day. You will have done a good job if by the end of today you have clarified and prioritised the key questions and if you have initiated a much-needed interaction between formal education, training, adult education and language policy.

We wish you all the best for fruitful deliberations.

THE NQF: CHALLENGES IN THE LANGUAGE FIELD

Schalk Engelbrecht and Gerard Schuring

Human Sciences Research Council

1 INTRODUCTION

On 4 October 1995 the government published the *South African Qualifications Authority Act* to provide for the development and implementation of a National Qualifications Framework and to establish the South African Qualifications Authority. This act is based on a report produced by the National Training Board with the title: *A discussion document on a National Training Strategy Initiative* (abbreviated NTSI). The public debate on the NQF is taken forward in an as yet unpublished report of the HSRC provisionally titled: *Ways of seeing the National Qualifications Framework* (abbreviated WNQF). The act and the two reports show that the NQF will have a profound influence on the teaching of all subjects, including all the different language subjects.

The aim of our presentation is to identify and discuss some of the challenges of the NQF concept for the teaching of language. The first challenge which curriculum developers, textbook writers and educators face is that they will have to familiarise themselves with NQF thinking. A second challenge for the stakeholders in language teaching is how to get started in defining new language learning standards and qualifications. A third and very important challenge is to find answers to the question of how the different language units and language qualifications should articulate with one another.

2 SOME SALIENT FEATURES OF NQF THINKING

It is impossible to discuss or explain all the concepts used in NQF thinking in a short paper. Both reports mentioned earlier are more than 200 pages each. There are many different aspects and concepts in NQF thinking of which some are difficult and complicated. A short discussion of a few concepts will however show that it is very important for all stakeholders in language teaching to become involved in the NQF debate.

2.1 Levels and qualifications

The NQF is concerned with formal qualifications and levels of learning. At present a distinction is made between eight levels. Level 1 is equivalent to Standard 7 and the name of the qualification for this level may be something like 'General

Education Certificate'. Levels 2, 3 and 4 are equivalent to Standards 8, 9 and 10. A qualification on Level 4 may be called a 'Further Education Certificate'. Levels 5 to 8 are reserved for higher certificates, diplomas and degrees. Below Level 1 or Standard 7 several sublevels or grades are recognised. If there are three sublevels for Adult Basic Education and Training and eight sublevels for formal schooling the language fraternity of South Africa will have to answer the question if it is possible to distinguish between 16 levels of competence in language use.

2.2 Competence and other concepts

To answer this type of question stakeholders in language learning may have to discuss whether it is possible in the language learning field to describe:

- *competence* in language use as the ability to integrate and apply a range of capabilities within specified contexts;
- *contexts* of language use as ranging from being familiar and predictable to completely unfamiliar and unpredictable;
- *performance* of language tasks as integrated applications of capabilities within specified contexts;
- *integrated language assessment* as assessment of language performance to obtain evidence of a persons competence in language use;
- a *capability* as an integrated whole of knowledge, abilities and value orientations;
- the relevant *abilities* as conceptual language problem-posing and problem-solving, tool usage and dexterity in language use, communication and social interaction about language, and modes of learning or familiarity with types of language tasks.

Familiarity with concepts such as these is also necessary because in NQF thinking each qualification is made up of a number of *units of learning*, each unit of learning is aimed at mastering and assessing one or more *learning outcomes* and each learning outcome is described in terms of statements on performance, capabilities and assessment.

2.3 Units of learning

A unit of learning is the smallest chunk of learning that can be meaningfully assessed at a specified level on the National Qualifications Framework. Each unit is registered on a national register and is assigned a certain credit value or number of points. It may be possible to equate the credit points to a nominal number of contact hours between learner and educator. A figure of 40 hours is suggested by some stakeholders. When a learner has achieved the required number and range of

credits and fulfilled possible other requirements he or she is awarded a national qualification.

This means that the stakeholders in language learning will have to develop and register units of learning for each language on all levels. To describe and develop units of language learning requires familiarity with a range of concepts including those mentioned above.

2.4 Misconceptions

There are some misconceptions in this connection. One misconception is that subjects as such or different types of knowledge are immaterial. In other words, that subjects are only taught because they are the necessary vehicles for the teaching, demonstration and assessment of abilities. This is clearly not the aim of the NQF. Both knowledge and abilities are needed to develop competence. In NQF thinking, knowledge and abilities are not seen as discrete elements but as dimensions of capabilities and competence. One may have all the problem-solving or decoding abilities to understand a message in French, but if one does not know English, one will not be able to decode the content of a message in English.

Another misconception is that the development of units of language learning is simply the cutting up and some re-arrangement of the topics in an existing syllabus. We hope that the discussion up to this point has made it clear that this is certainly not the case. In stead of ignoring subjects, this demands of the NQF an opportunity to evaluate the existing language syllabi and to think about what should be included and what should be excluded on each level of language learning.

3 HOW TO GET STARTED

A second main challenge facing the language learning stakeholders, is how to start the development of new language learning units and new language qualifications. The NQF approach is widely accepted and will be implemented. At present there is still real opportunity to become involved and to influence the standards which will be set for language qualifications.

In the report *Ways of seeing the National Qualifications Framework*, five steps are suggested to develop the NQF in different fields of learning. The stages are:

(1) The preparation phase

(2) Setting up a National Standards Body

(3) Writing unit standards

(4) Recommending qualifications and moderators

(5) Contextualising learning for specific purposes

3.1 The preparation phase

It is suggested that the first step in the preparatory phase is to establish a legitimate co-ordinating structure for the language field. The appointment of a representative working group and an acceptable co-ordinator may be necessary to facilitate the smooth running of activities.

The working group could start by asking questions such as the following:

- What is the context and status of language learning at present?
- What is the purpose of language learning?
- What constitutes competent language performance and how many competence levels can be identified?
- Is it possible to identify language activities which are indicative of language capabilities and competent performance?
- Is it possible to identify meaningful levels of progression in language capabilities?

The main aim of these questions is to think about and identify capabilities and competencies in the language field. The aim is not to draw up a list of discrete tasks or language topics. The results of this phase will act as an input into the discussion about standards in a later phase.

3.2 Setting up a National Standards Body

To set standards is a difficult task which differs from field to field. According to the recently published act, one of the functions of SAQA (the South African Qualifications Authority) is to formulate and publish policies and criteria for the registration of bodies responsible for establishing education and training standards or qualifications. The National Strategy report envisages that these kind of bodies could replace the existing Industrial Training Boards. The report *Ways of seeing the NQF* calls these bodies National Standards Bodies and anticipates that they will be large, generic bodies which seek to find coherence, progression and flexibility across a very wide field of learning. It gives examples of several possible wide bodies, including a body for Communication Science and Languages. Should a National Standards Body for Communication Science and Language eventually be established, it will be a bonus for that body if the communication and language learning stakeholders had already organised themselves and made progress in the development of the NQF for their field.

2.3 Writing unit standards

A standard has to be produced for each unit of learning. Writing unit standards is essentially a process of identifying the capabilities at a specified level of

competence. A capability is a unified whole of knowledge and abilities. A unit standard may include among other things the following five statements:

- A statement on the key capability which the learner is required to demonstrate on successful completion of the unit. The key capability can be formulated in the form of a statement such as: Within this area of learning, a competent performer should be capable of, for example, writing and answering business letters.
- A knowledge statement which can include aspects such as theories, principles and procedures.
- A statement on the abilities which have to be mastered to achieve real capability.
- A list of performance statements. In other words meaningful activities which contribute to the overall capability.
- A statement or list of assessment criteria which can be used to demonstrate capability in successful performance.

3.4 Recommending qualifications and moderators

A qualification is a meaningful clustering of learning units which lay the basis for further learning. This means that pathways between different units and qualifications must be created. A qualification may consist of a number of compulsory units and where applicable also a number of optional units. The body responsible for establishing qualifications in a wide field and the body responsible for establishing unit standards in the same field may be one and the same body.

Accredited bodies will be responsible for monitoring and auditing achievement in unit standards and qualifications (Section 5(a) of the act). But it is also necessary to take steps to ensure compliance with provisions for accreditation and to take steps which will ensure that standards and registered qualifications are internationally comparable (Section 5(b) of the act). The people responsible for this type of moderation cannot be the accredited bodies themselves.

3.5 Contextualising learning for specific purposes

The last step is to develop ways and means which enable individual providers and private companies to prepare learners for assessment in ways that are appropriate to their contexts. Learners will also be free to submit themselves for assessment against the standards set. The important difference between the existing and the NQF approach is that curriculum prescriptions will be avoided as much as possible and be replaced by the assessment of the capabilities and competencies which are specified in accessible unit standards and qualification specifications.

4 THE ARTICULATION OF LANGUAGE UNITS AND QUALIFICATIONS

A third challenge is to develop a new system of articulation between all the different types of language units and qualifications which can be developed in future. In the past educators have argued for the development of a large number of different types of language courses. Distinctions were made between first, second and third languages, between general, applied and basic language courses and between courses presented on a standard and a higher grade. Finally many other different types of language courses are presented by institutions and organisations offering courses in Adult Basic Education and language courses for special purposes.

The development of units for language may reduce some of these distinctions but on the other hand may also lead to the introduction of many new types of language units. The problem of how to combine all the different language units in one single system was a difficult problem in the past and is still difficult to solve.

One avenue along which a solution is sought, is to select one type of language course running from the lowest sublevel to the highest level as a standard language course. The identification of the levels and credit values of all other types of language courses, language modules and units of language learning can be set in relation to the agreed standard language course. The course suggested for this purpose is a second language course. It is also possible and probably better to select the study of a first language, in other words a real or hypothetical mother tongue or home language, as model. Whatever language course is agreed upon as standard or norm of reference, the implication is that the level assigned to a language unit is not necessarily in direct relation to the historical year of schooling or language study. A learner presenting one language on level 3 may for example in the same year present another language on Level 1. The certificate will probably specify both the levels and the names of the language units studied by the learner.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is clear from the arguments presented above that a possible manner of facing the challenges of the NQF for language teaching and training, is to develop all the units of language learning for one language from the lowest sublevel to the highest level. It is suggested that the study of a home language should be selected for this purpose. Once a complete set of unit standards is developed for one type of language course, the available set can be used as an example and a benchmark for the development of all other language courses. The process should allow for continuous re-evaluation and reformulation of the norm language course.

The development, registration and implementation of language learning units will take time. The sooner the new challenges facing all stakeholders in language learning are processed and answered by the stakeholders, the better for our children and for the future of South Africa.

LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK: AN INTRODUCTION TO COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Daryl McLean[1]
USWE Adult Basic Education Project

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this paper

The IEB wanted this paper to be written (I think) for two reasons. The first is to help those people who may want to participate in the current debates about educational change in South Africa, but who find the jargon and the concepts so bewildering that they are effectively excluded. I have tried, in this paper, to provide a fairly simple overview of the issues. However, there are so many issues and each issue is so complex that I fear (on the one hand) that I have glossed over some of the difficulties and (on the other hand) that the paper is still not very easy to read.

The second reason why the IEB asked for this paper is that there is a great deal of confusion in the policy debates, even among those people who are already participating. I think the IEB hoped that this paper would be able to clarify some of the key issues, for example by providing a simple answer to the question: 'What is competency-based education and training (CBET)?' But I argue in this paper that CBET is seriously undertheorised (especially in South Africa), and that much of the confusion in our policy debates stems from these theoretical inadequacies. Providing an introduction to the debates (the first goal of this paper) is somewhat at odds with the dense theoretical work needed to resolve areas of confusion. Consequently, although I have tried at least to map out where some of the confusion lies, I have for the most part not attempted to resolve it.

1.2 The structure of this paper

There are four parts to this paper. In the first part, I provide a critical description of CBET, specifically but not exclusively in relation to South Africa. In the second part, I sketch some of the recent trends in the theory of language education which are pertinent to our consideration of CBET in South Africa. In the third part, I attempt to link the first and second parts of the paper, focusing specifically on competency-based language education. In the fourth part, I provide an extensive set of references for readers interested in pursuing the topic.

I have assumed, for purposes of this paper, that my audience are primarily language educators wanting to learn about CBET, rather than the other way around. Consequently, Section 2 of the paper is more detailed than the other sections, and constitutes the bulk of the paper.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2.1 Outline of this section

When I first started reading about CBET, it quickly became evident to me that CBET was used as a generic label for what were often very different kinds of education and training. (Much of my paper elaborates on this.) The differences between various forms of CBET seem to cluster around two factors: *why* it is introduced (i.e. the social functions of CBET), and *how* it is introduced (i.e. the forms of curriculum, assessment, instruction, etc. which CBET takes).

Research into CBET tends to focus either on the 'why' factors (sociological research) or on the 'how' factors ('educational' issues). I believe that it is crucial not only for us to consider both sets of factors, but also to *integrate* our analysis of these factors. As Jackson has argued:

> 'the effect of the competency paradigm is not limited by its power to shape the practice of individual teachers or the decision-making of individual institutions. Its impact is also systemic, shaping the various kinds of regulatory activities through which the state has a voice in the conduct of education, and through which the educational apparatus reproduces itself' (1989:83).

The failure of most research to integrate the study of these factors reflects the lack of a theoretical understanding of what kind of educational phenomenon CBET actually is. Magnusson & Osborne's claim (1990:9) that CBET is a 'technology' (a configuration of knowledge and power) is closer to a theoretical formulation than most. But Magnusson & Osborne have *applied* a (slightly outdated) theory rather than *deriving* their theory from a study of CBET. The lack of an adequate theory as to what constitutes CBET is, I believe, a major cause of confusion in our debates.

This section of my paper describes the kinds of factors which I think any theory of CBET should be able to account for. Some of these are what I call 'why' factors (Section 2.2 below); others are what I call 'how' factors (Section 2.3 below). Although I have in this paper not undertaken the task of theorising CBET, I hope that the theory implicit in my description will provide readers with some of the conceptual tools needed to engage with current policy proposals.

2.2 Why CBET?

In looking at the sociological factors behind the rise of CBET as an educational movement, I will be describing CBET in four countries in which it is currently very influential (Section 2.2.1). Then I will refer to four sociological critiques of CBET (Section 2.2.2). Finally, I will summarise my analysis of these sociological factors (Section 2.2.3).

2.2.1 *A brief history of CBET*

2.2.1.1 CBET: THE RISE OF AN EDUCATIONAL REFORM MOVEMENT

CBET has been described as 'the educational reform movement of the 70's and 80's' (Sheaff s.a.:1):

- In the USA by 1980, more than 70 % of the states had legislated the requirement of 'some form of minimum competency testing of students' (*ibid.*).
- In the UK, 'there was patchy and desultory interest in CBET until the early 1980's, when the basis of a firmer training policy was laid by a series of White Papers' (Tuxworth 1989:17). Implemented initially in the vocational training sector, CBET in the UK is currently being piloted for wider implementation even in the higher education sector (Burke 1991).
- In Australia, CBET was implemented gradually in the training sector, but 'became accepted as an integral part of the national training reform agenda' in 1990 (Docking 1994:10), and is now central to the government's vision for restructuring education and training.
- In South Africa, a form of CBET was widely implemented in the training sector during the 1980s; but it now appears that (a different form of) CBET will be the mechanism for integrating and transforming the entire education and training systems (*White Paper* 1994).

Jackson, writing in Canada, provides an evocative account of the epidemic which some Australian educators (*Education Links* 1992) have called 'the Competency Can Can'. She writes that the

> competency syndrome has spread much like a socially transmitted disease. It is communicated not only through the persuasive rhetoric of public policy, but also through routine contact with administrative and funding mechanisms which penetrate and organise learning activities in schools, colleges, social agencies, labour organisations, community groups, and employer-based training programmes. Whether in literacy programmes, English as a second language training, adult basic education, skills upgrading, job re-training ... the list goes on ... (1989:78).

2.2.1.2 FACTORS BEHIND THE RISE OF CBET INTERNATIONALLY

References to the origins of CBET commonly locate its beginnings in the 1920s, in

> ideas of educational reform linked to industrial/business models centred on specification of outcomes in behavioural objectives form (Tuxworth 1989:11).

The use of behavioural objectives in education and/or training appears to be common in the history of many countries. However, from the 1960s onward, CBET emerged with increasing impetus and sophistication on a wide scale. In each case, it appears that the

> ... competency-based approach, while not the reason for change, became the means by which change could be effected (Docking 1994:10).

Reasons for the introduction of CBET appear to be different in each case. Accountability and the development of a flexible and more highly skilled workforce seem to be common factors behind most of the initiatives. For example, within the USA, CBET was central to attempts to restructure teacher education during the 1960s, in response to

> ... the demand for greater accountability in education, for increased emphasis on the economy, and towards more community involvement in decision-making ... later developments extended applications of the idea to elementary schools, to minimum competency standards for high school graduation and to vocational education (*ibid.*).

In England, on the other hand, although accountability is also a major concern behind the rise of CBET, the vocationalisation of education is treated in the research literature as a more important issue. Thus Field (1991:42) describes the English reforms as

> ... therefore the latest refinement in what might be called "the pedagogy of labour" — that is, the sponsoring of structured and planned learning from the activity of work, and for work.

In Australia, the reforms have been motivated by a perceived need to orient education and training to the changing nature of the Australian (and world) economy:

> The education and training arrangements in Australia are premised on the labour force needs of an *industrial* economy: a small minority of professional workers and highly skilled workers, and a large majority of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who learn their skills on-the-job; critical skill gaps have been filled through immigration. Such notions are dangerously obsolete in the *post-industrial* OECD economies where high technology and the service sector are growing in importance ... (1968 OECD report, cited in Docking 1994:9).

> Many saw competency standards as the vehicle through which employment and training reforms could be achieved ... Competency standards were also seen as a crucial ingredient in the promotion of Australia's economic and industrial reform (Chappell 1995:2).

The Australian concerns tend to reflect a more macro-economic vision than the English, which in both conception and practice have been driven by the needs of particular industries rather than by a coherent national perspective. Also, accountability seems to be rather less of an issue in the Australian initiatives than in the North American movement.

2.2.1.3 FACTORS BEHIND THE RISE OF CBET IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa, factors behind the rise of CBET have been different at different points. When CBET was implemented in the vocational training sector in the 1980s, it appears that flexibility and accountability were the dominant concerns. Under the August 1990 amendments to the Manpower Training Act, CBET was a legal requirement on Industry Training Boards (ITBs), linked as a mechanism of accountability to the simultaneous devolution of responsibility for training. In a 1992 study conducted for the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI), Bennell reported that

> [t]he introduction of [competency-based modular training] by ITB's is revolutionising training provision right across industry in South Africa. Some teething problems are being encountered but the obvious benefits of CBMT are widely recognised by both employers and employees (1992:4).

And also that

> the response of [Industry Training Boards] to the introduction of [competency-based modular training] and criterion referenced instruction has, with one or two exceptions, been unequivocally positive. Dramatic improvements in the quality and cost-effectiveness of training at all levels are widely reported although most industries have yet to complete CBMT curricula and support materials for all proposed training (1992:9).

Trade unions and employers, partly on the basis of this experience and partly on the basis of the international trend toward using CBET as the mechanism for reforming education and training, adopted competencies as a central feature of the proposed National Qualifications Framework (NQF). However, the form of CBET which was introduced in the 1980s in the vocational training sector is rather different to the form of CBET currently being proposed for the NQF — something which I suspect is not widely understood by training programmes which already see themselves as 'competency-based'. I review some of the educational differences in Section 2.3 of this paper; but here I would like to focus on differences in the social functions currently proposed for CBET in South Africa.

Presently, both the education and the training systems in South Africa are highly fragmented. The institutions, curricula and qualifications for education and training hardly link at all:

- In the education sector in 1993, there were 15 different ministries and 19 organisational departments of education, 129 technical colleges, 103 colleges of education, 15 technikons and 21 universities (NTB 1993:39).
- In the training sector, 'there were 9 autonomous Regional Training Centres with 62 satellite campuses and 65 mobile centres. Each Centre had an independent governing body ... Private training centres and training centres established by employers number some 1417 ... There were separate labour departments in each of the independent homelands to deal with training for local authorities, the public sector and some parastatals ... Industry Training Boards catered for some 26 of the identified industries ... [and] there was no single certification body for training' (*ibid.*:40-41).
- Not only did the curricula, qualifications, infrastructure, etc. of several categories of institution not link between the education and training sectors; in many cases they did not even link within sectors. (For example, technikon curricula and qualifications did not often link with those of the universities.)
- 'The legal framework for education and training was set by a range of 130 Statutes ... ' (*ibid.*)

These incoherences in the education and training systems have had a damaging effect both on the functioning of individuals (who are unable to move within or between systems) and on the economy and society more broadly (since the human resources of South Africa cannot be flexibly and efficiently utilised under the current system).

The policy debates around education and training have, for the past five years at least, therefore agreed on the need to integrate education and training. The mechanism which has been proposed is a National Qualifications Framework, which will integrate the systems of provision through first integrating the qualifications structure, and thereby achieving a 'washback' integration of curricula, institutions, etc. Broadly speaking, the path proposed for the development of the NQF is a process in which

- central government (via the South African Qualifications Authority) will establish a framework for the NQF which describes the framework and processes for standard-setting
- National Standards Bodies representative of stakeholders will negotiate the standards for education and training in a variety of domains (e.g. Communication Science and Languages; Business, Commerce and Management Sciences, etc.)

- Education and Training Qualification Authorities (ETQAs) will be responsible for ensuring that the standards are adhered to

In order for any education or training course to be accredited, the course will need to conform to the standards set through these processes. The NQF will thereby achieve an assessment-led (more accurately, an accreditation-led) reform of the education and training systems.

Two major concerns provide the impetus behind the NQF in South Africa. First, there is a concern that our education and training systems should enable the country to become more economically competitive. Second, there is a recognition of the need for redress of historical inequities resulting from and sedimented in the structure of our education and training systems. It is common cause that in the debates within the NTB, employers were primarily concerned about the first of these issues, trade unions with the second. The principles described by the NTB for the development of the NQF are therefore intended to embody both these concerns. The NTB (NTB 1993:9-11) believes that the NQF should aim to achieve

- integration (of education and training)
- relevance ('to national development needs; industry and service sector needs; regional, local and community needs; individual development needs and needs relating to the advancement of knowledge, science and technology. Relevance refers here to the need for education and training not to be pursued as ends in themselves, but as a means to achieve other ends, the specific needs listed here')
- credibility ('international credibility and credibility for industry and service sectors, providers and learners in its ability to achieve the nationally agreed aims for education and training')
- coherence and flexibility ('education and training should adhere to a coherent framework of principles and certification which may be established at national level, but should permit the flexibility of interpretation required to meet the needs of industry and service sectors, providers and learners')
- standards ('... should be expressed in terms of a nationally agreed framework and nationally and internationally accepted outcomes')
- legitimacy ('education and training should provide for the participation in planning and co-ordination thereof of all significant stakeholders, to ensure transparency')
- access ('... to appropriate levels of education and training should be provided for all prospective learners in a manner which facilitates progression')
- articulation ('education and training should provide for learners, on successful completion of accredited prerequisites to move between components of the delivery system')

- progression ('education and training should ensure that the framework of qualifications permits individuals to progress through the levels of national qualifications via different appropriate combinations of the components of the delivery system')
- portability ('education and training should provide for learners to transfer their credits or qualifications from one learning institution and/or employer to another')
- recognition of prior learning ('education and training should through assessment give credit to prior learning obtained through formal, non-formal and informal learning and/or experience')
- guidance of learners ('education and training should provide for the guidance of learners by persons who meet nationally recognised standards for educators and trainers').

Economic competitiveness, within this vision, will be achieved through relevance, standards, coherence and flexibility, etc. Redress of historical imbalances should be achieved through the recognition of prior learning, access, portability and mobility, etc. The link between these two concerns is what distinguishes the NQF from policy initiatives using CBET elsewhere in the world. As Christie notes:

> an important local addition to international debates is the links drawn between human resource development and equity policies to redress the apartheid legacy. In this regard, the White Paper builds on the earlier ANC and Cosatu political platform of "growth through redistribution", which links popular demands for social equity with strategies for economic development. The White Paper interweaves two discourses: alongside a discourse of human resource development is an ultimately more powerful discourse of human rights (1995:8).

The entry point of CBET in this vision of the NQF is as the mechanism for setting, assessing and evaluating the new standards. (It is *not* — and this is a crucial issue I will return to later in the paper — necessarily the mechanism for *implementing* the standards). The central feature of the standard-setting framework is that the standards set by every sector for each level would need to be specified in terms of 'outcomes' (levels of competence). This is the way in which articulation, portability, access, etc. can be achieved, as Docking argues of Australia:

> The way forward was to end the sharp exclusive demarcation between professional, skilled and unskilled workers, a demarcation supported by our approach to education and training, and to develop a workforce that was 'seamless' in its skills and an education and training system that reflected that continuity.
>
> A 'seamless' system can be achieved in one of two ways — either remove all distinctions (clearly unworkable) or increase the number of distinctions to the

> point that they are so small that the appearance of seamlessness is achieved (much as a curve can be drawn by joining a large number of very short straight lines). In the past, competence was only recognised by the achievement of large inviolable chunks such as degrees (three or more years) and trade certificates (four years). If we could recognise smaller steps in achievement that build to these levels of accomplishment, perhaps a seamless and continuous education and training pathway could be conceived. To achieve this, we would have to break down our existing qualifications into their component parts (Docking 1994:9).

The motives behind the introduction of CBET in South Africa presently (the social functions envisaged for the educational changes) are therefore not exactly the same as the rationale behind its introduction elsewhere in the world, and are also different to the earlier functions of CBET in South Africa.

2.2.2 *Sociological critiques of CBET*

It is worth exploring some of the sociological critiques of CBET (and of the integration of education and training as the rationale for introducing CBET), since these have not been widely heard in the South African debates. I have focused below on the critique of four factors, which I have called accountability, instrumentalism, agency, and thoughtfulness.

2.2.2.1 THE CRITIQUE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The introduction of CBET as a mechanism for enforcing accountability has been widely criticised. Jackson, writing in a Canadian context, describes the competency paradigm as an 'invasive power as a system of accountability for educational action' (1989:82). Brown argues of Australia that

> [t]hese initiatives are not reforms but are rather hegemonic. The defining of learning and teaching using competencies has embedded within it an ideology of control intended for the regulation of participants ... (1992:26).

And also more bluntly that

> ... the competency agenda is a strategy for the reform of workers, not reform for workers ... more a strategy aimed at the regulation of *variable* capital (*ibid.*:28).

Post-structuralist analyses of the rise of CBET in England have argued, *inter alia*, that it

> ... reflects a fundamental change in the mode of regulation in society associated with the social control of expertise and the position and regulation of "experts" as with the surveillance of those who form their client groups (Jones & Moore 1993:385).

These critiques of accountability are beginning to be voiced in South Africa (especially in the higher education sector), without the critics exploring the kind of accountability concerns embodied in the South African proposals. The principles of 'legitimacy', 'credibility' and 'relevance' clearly represent some notion of accountability, but the form of these concerns is very different to those being criticised by Jackson and Brown.

The value of the sociological critique of authoritarian notions of accountability is that it links to the distinction between prescriptive and heuristic uses of competencies, which I deal with in Section 2.3 below. If CBET in South Africa is intended to achieve individual empowerment and socio-economic change, South Africa will, I argue, need to avoid prescriptivism in implementing the NQF.

2.2.2.2 THE CRITIQUE OF 'INSTRUMENTALISM'

The second kind of sociological critique of CBET is a critique of the attempt to use education and training *narrowly* to achieve socio-economic reforms (sometimes described as 'economic instrumentalism').

Much of the impetus driving CBET throughout the world is the attempt to re-mould education and training around the needs of the economy. This impetus is based on an analysis of changes taking place in (specifically) Western economies:

> Modern capitalist production systems have evidently been evolving over the last couple of decades away from relatively rigid Fordist industrial structures towards more flexible forms of production organisation (Watkins 1991:78).

The advantage of flexible production systems is that they are more responsive to fluctuating markets. However, entailed in such systems is

> the need for workers who have been educated and trained to change quickly from one job to another whilst also contributing forms of knowledge on how productivity and/or profitability might be enhanced (OECD 1989).

Christie provides a good summary of the dominant thinking behind South African proposals:

> Though it is a moot point whether or not South African production is moving toward "post fordism" ... the current consensus among influential policy actors is that South African economic development requires better educated workers, who are conversant with mathematics and science as required by technological developments, as well as possessing the qualities of flexibility, problem-solving and so on listed earlier. In short, there is a need for education to be more responsive to changing patterns of work. Up to this point, there are strong similarities between local and international debates (1995: 7-8).

Yet the consensus among policy actors (in South Africa as much as elsewhere) is not always grounded on careful study. An official OECD report itself argues that

> [i]n the midst of the change and uncertainty that are sweeping the OECD economies, "education and the economy" has become a catch-phrase for a vague but urgent dissatisfaction with the status quo. It does not proceed from well-articulated ideas of what the two — education, the economy — have to do with one another or what direction policy changes should take (OECD 1989:19).

Rather, it appears that CBET has become a 'wish mechanism'. (Giroux uses the term to describe ways in which people tend to project their aspirations for social change onto education.)

Luke, in a wide-ranging response to the argument that education and training reform is the key to economic growth, provides evidence to the contrary and suggests that

> [e]ducators at all levels need to avoid buying into approaches to literacy that displace structural economic problems from larger societal, corporate and government systems onto individual human subjects, which locate the problems with the economy in individuals' skill-deficits, failures of character, impoverished morals and so forth ... (1992:12).

The substance of this critique is not that education and training reforms are unimportant to socio-economic reform. It is widely accepted that 'the "human factor" is assuming pre-eminence as a factor of production' (by implication that the shift to a more flexible workforce is likely to be necessary) and that 'that which is "education" is becoming less clearly distinct from that which is "the economy"' (OECD 1989:18-19). Consequently,

> [w]ithout major changes in the way schools and firms train workers over the course of a lifetime, no amount of macro-economic fine-tuning or technological innovation will be able to produce significantly improved economic performance and a rising standard of living' (Devtouzos *et al.* in Rubenson 1992:26).

The critique is focused rather on two issues. First, that the proposed changes cannot by themselves be expected to achieve the desired reforms. (For example, recent research suggests that strategic management competence is a more important index to increased productivity in industry than the skills level of workers *per se*.) Second, that preparing people for life in the kind of society we are entering entails far more than preparing them to meet the needs of industry. The OECD report cited above argues that

> the very notion of what it means to be active in society is changing. Employment is no longer the *sine qua non*. Widespread unemployment, chronic long-term unemployment, and longer life expectancy beyond

> retirement have raised to high, nearly unmanageable levels, the financial dependency upon the working population while creating a large class of persons whose self-fulfilment depends on more than passive receipt of transfer payments. This means that educational preparation for an active society needs to be much more than simple preparation for working life (1989:19).

A second OECD report argues that

> [e]ven the call for an adaptable, flexible work force implies a docile and passive capacity to respond to the latest technological innovations introduced by management rather than an ability to question their origin, whose interests they enhance and why alternative processes were not debated. Thus, what is needed is to provide workers with insights which stress what Apple calls social literacy rather than merely hands-on competencies ... (Watkins, 1991).

This sociological critique links to the distinction between narrow and broad definitions of competence, which I deal with in the next section; and points to the need for a broad definition in the South African context.

2.2.2.3 THE CRITIQUE OF 'AGENCY'

Much of the sociological critique of CBET rests ultimately on who is driving the reforms in each case (the agents of reform). Crudely, there is a strong relationship between who sets the standards, the standards which are set, and the social function of these standards.

For example, in England, the standard-setting bodies (Industry Lead Boards) are strongly dominated by big business. Raggatt's analysis is that

> 'the domination of lead bodies by employers has resulted in standards that are too occupationally specific and lack the transferable skills necessary to produce a competent workforce' (1991:xvi).

The goal of the policy (to produce a more flexible workforce which could help lift British industry into a post-Fordist economy) may thus be defeated by the fact that 'the reform is, to a very large degree, in the hands of employers' (*ibid.*:61).

In Australia, the standard-setting process has been driven jointly by industry and organised labour. South Africa has been substantially influenced by the Australian model, with the result that although government representatives from the education sector sit on the National Training Board, the policy discussions around the NQF, CBET and standard-setting have been very markedly driven by business and organised labour.

The logic of the model behind the NQF is that the state will facilitate the development of the framework by moderating and mediating the participation of various organised stakeholders. As Nattrass *et al.* have argued, this model of social

democracy is typically equitable in contexts of low unemployment, but in the socio-economic conditions of South Africa it marginalises significant sectors of the population (1995:17) — those not sufficiently well-organised or powerful enough to have a voice in the standard-setting processes. Parker levels a critique of the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) processes around just this issue. He writes that they

> ... may well seem appropriate and useful to significant policy actors. What this picture silences, what are not articulated are the voices of those most likely to be excluded from the new system of education: rural people, women, unemployed youth ... (1993:226).

Later in his article, Parker directs the critique again at the

> ... eurocentric assumption that the new South Africa will be a civil society within which education system change is dominated by a "mechanism of change" which privileges the interaction of educationally dominant and assertive groups (Archer, in Parker 1993:226).

The problem described here by Parker has already begun to manifest itself in the policy debates leading toward standard-setting for the NQF. One example may help to illustrate the issue: It is well known that South Africa has a gender-stratified workforce, that the majority of workers and employers within the formal economy are male. If the 'stakeholders' dominant in the standard-setting processes for the majority of domains in South African education and training are organised labour and business, the standards set for these domains are likely to reflect and reinforce patriarchal domination of education and training, and the employment opportunities associated with them. Yet in many sectors of the economy (especially manufacturing and the service sector) organised labour and business are complemented by or in competition with a burgeoning informal sector which is so poorly organised as to be almost invisible as a 'stakeholder'. Unless the 'bottom-up' standard-setting processes recognise and deal with the inequalities which characterise our society, the NQF — intended as an exercise in participatory democracy — may ironically become a mechanism for empowering the powerful, and disempowering the disempowered.

2.2.2.4 THE CRITIQUE OF 'THOUGHTFULNESS'

Finally, there have been criticisms of the way in which South African education and training policy proposals have borrowed extensively and rather too unproblematically from other countries. The South African policy work has developed out of very extensive international consultation on the part of organised labour and business in particular, and has been strongly influenced by the so-called AD (anglophonic developing) countries. The differences between the educational and broader socio-economic conditions of these countries and South Africa has not been the subject of sufficient analysis. For example, some differences in the educational contexts are that

> ... in the English context ... a pivotal concern of reform is to move from the current statutory 11 years of education towards a situation in which all will eventually have 13 years of pre-employment education and training. In South Africa, however, the related challenge is to move to 9 years of formal schooling for all ... The difference in educational provision is reflected in a situation for [anglophone developed] countries in which basic literacy and numeracy have been almost universalised; whereas it is argued that possibly 11 million or more adult South Africans are neither functionally literate nor numerate (McGrath 1995:8).

Some differences in the socio-economic contexts are that

> AD [anglophonic developing countries] production is increasingly generated within the tertiary sector, whilst in South Africa the primary sector is still a significant player. Whilst AD concerns with the likely structure of a Post-Industrial or Post-Fordist economic and social system are echoed in sectors of South African academia and training; there they exist concurrently with arguments that a post-apartheid South African economy may well exhibit increased Fordist tendencies ... (*ibid.*:9).

The implications which these differences in socio-economic and educational contexts have for policy work are enormous, yet policy analysis in South Africa has not rigorously engaged with the issues. For example, the idea of a 'seamless' education and training system originated in New Zealand, which has a far less diversified economic structure than South Africa. The major problem in developing a seamless system is the extent to which competence (knowledge, skills, etc.) developed in one sector can be transferred to another. Where the economy is highly diversified, the possibilities for transferring knowledge and skills across sectors (i.e. the possibilities for seamlessness) are more limited.

This is the substance of McGrath's analysis — that neither the justifications for nor the critiques of CBET can be imported as unproblematically as they have been in South Africa:

> The process of importation of external ideas and their subsequent indigenisation is far from simple. As is attested by many case studies on donor-led African education systems and the societal analysis approach for European industrial systems, settings such as education, training and workplace organisation are not only inter-related but are intimately shaped by their unique economic, ideological, institutional and socio-cultural contexts. Unless education and training within a particular country is understood within this framework, any reading of it will be seriously deficient (*ibid.*:2).

2.2.3 *Summary*

The purpose of this thumbnail sketch of the CBET movement in different countries is to illustrate how it has arisen in different countries for different reasons; how the forces driving it in each country have been different; and how the contexts of its development and implementation have been different.

To understand CBET in South Africa, we need to understand the peculiarities of its social function in our contexts. I hope the review above has demonstrated that CBET is *intended* to achieve socio-economic goals in South Africa which are not exactly the same as those in other countries, but that neither the goals nor the use of CBET to achieve those goals has been as carefully considered as it might be. We will need to be more rigorous if we are not to run foul of the criticisms which have been levelled at CBET elsewhere.

2.3 How does CBET work?

In much the same way as CBET is sociologically different across contexts, it is also often educationally different. The educational differences range across differences in

> ... curriculum, teaching strategies, assessment, reporting, accreditation, programme evaluation and certification (Docking 1994:11).

In this section I will be reviewing just three of the key educational features which characterise CBET. In Section 2.3.4 I review curriculum issues; in Section 2.3.5 I review assessment issues; in Section 2.3.6 I review teaching/learning practices.

It seems to me that three continua serve to distinguish CBET programmes from each other. First, there is a conceptual continuum in the definition of competence, from narrow behaviourist views through to broader conceptions which are 'interwoven with liberal humanist discourse' (Usher & Edwards 1994:110). I begin by exploring this continuum in Section 2.3.1 below. Second, there is a continuum in the functions ascribed to competencies, from prescriptive functions resonant with 'preactive' curriculum orientations, through to heuristic functions more compatible with interactive curriculum orientations. I explore this continuum in Section 2.3.2 below. Third, there is a continuum between CBET programmes and initiatives which have a technicist orientation and those in which there is a more holistic approach. I explore this issue in Section 2.3.3 below.

In Section 2.3.7 I summarise the main issues covered in this section of the paper, and point to the need for a broad definition and heuristic use of competencies, and a holistic approach to CBET in South Africa, if we are to achieve the transformative goals described in Section 2.2.

I will be attempting throughout this section to *link* the goals of the education and training reforms with the forms of curriculum, assessment and teaching/learning practices which CBET may assume.

2.3.1 *Definitions of 'competence'*

One factor which differentiates CBET programmes from each other is what definition of 'competence' the programme uses. Before reviewing the continuum of definitions used, I want to point to three difficulties intrinsic to defining competence in South Africa. The first difficulty is that there are many different terms used to refer to competence, and the meaning of these terms is continually shifting. The second is that terms are inconsistently defined or applied. The third is that competence as a concept has not been adequately theorised, and does not in its present form capture the complexities of the phenomenon it denotes. In the course of reviewing these difficulties, I will be providing an introduction to the present uses of some of the key CBET terms used in the NQF debates.

2.3.1.1 THE VARIETY OF TERMS

Newcomers to the CBET debates are always bewildered by the jargon. CBET itself is variously known as 'competency-based education (CBE)', 'competency-based training (CBT)', 'competency-based education and training (CBET)', 'outcomes-based education (OBE)', 'performance-based education', 'criterion-referenced instruction', 'proficiency-based education', 'mastery learning', etc. (Sheaff s.a.:1). Terms referring to the central concept of competence include 'competency', 'competence', 'outcome', 'ability' and (most recently) 'capability'.

As is often the case with jargon, much of this variation has arisen historically out of the varied contexts, paradigms and goals of CBET practice; but in common usage has lost these nuances. For example, the shifts in South Africa from 'competence' to 'outcome', 'ability' and 'capability' were partly the result of different international influences on our policy debates. (The initial use of 'competence' was drawn from the general prevalence of the term internationally and more specifically from the Australian Mayer Committee report, which provided a strong initial influence (USWE/Cosatu 1993). 'Outcome' was drawn from North American work in which it was sometimes used in preference to competence (Spady 1992, Spady & Marshall 1991). 'Ability' was borrowed from the Alverno College model). In part, these shifts were also intended to signal a move away from behaviourist notions toward broader conceptions of competence. However, the nuances of origin and conception have often not been understood even by people introducing the terms, with the result that many of the terms are used interchangeably in South Africa.

Allied to the problem of how much jargon is used, is a problem that the jargon keeps changing its meaning. Ashworth & Saxton (1990) argue of the British policy debates that competencies 'are of unclear logical status':

> What are competences? Are competences mental or physical characteristics of a person? Are competences pieces of behaviour — actions? Or is it a particular outcome of behaviour which is the focus of a competence — an overall product, irrespective of the details of how it was arrived at? (*ibid.*:9).

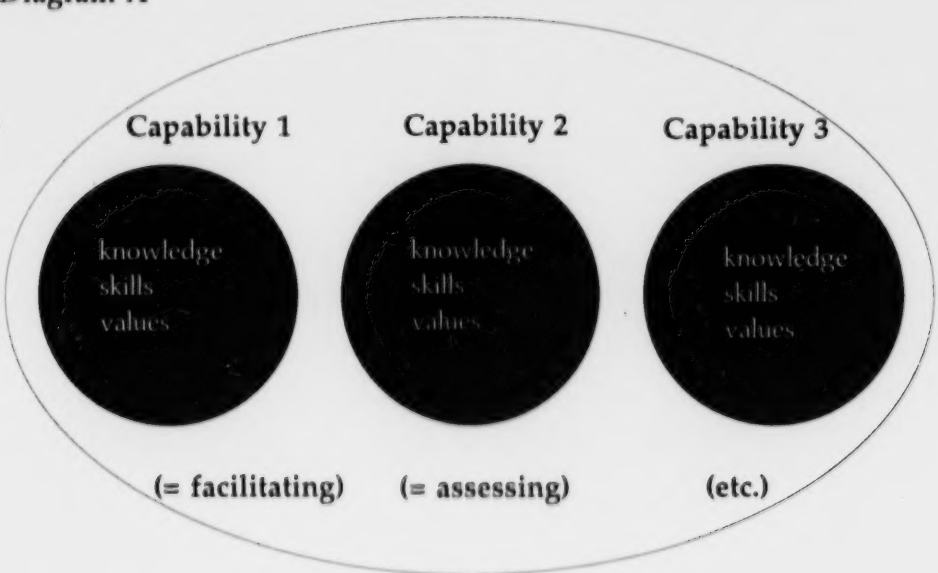
In South Africa, competence has at various points been defined in each of the ways described by Ashworth & Saxton.

The most recent thinking in South Africa exemplifies a trend toward revesting each term with a particular fixed meaning (HSRC 1995). In this way, the terms act as signifiers for the conceptual scaffolding required to build the NQF. Competence is the capacity for continuous performance within specified ranges and contexts, resulting from integration of a number of capabilities (*ibid.*:2). Capability is 'the expression of generic abilities as they relate to specific content areas, context and value frameworks' (*ibid.*:1). Abilities are generic terms for 'the mental and physical processes that people use, such as communication, decision-making, problem-solving and using tools' (*ibid.*:1). And outcomes are statements 'of the required learner capabilities that must be demonstrated' for any particular unit of learning (*ibid.*:1).

I have found it useful, whenever explaining this model to others, to use teaching as an example. The model suggests that competence is a general capacity (such as the capacity to teach). It is composed of different capabilities (such as the capability to plan lessons, facilitate a class, etc.). Capabilities in turn involve abilities (making decisions, solving problems, communicating, etc.), knowledge (e.g. of the subject matter) and values (e.g. respect for the learners). Outcomes are a description of the level of performance required before capability can reasonably be inferred — or, as I like to phrase it, an outcome is a particular level of capability achieved through a learning process. The diagram below depicts the relationship between the concepts signified by each term.

Competence (=Teaching)

Diagram A



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2.3.1.2 INCONSISTENT APPLICATION OF TERMS

A second set of difficulties in defining competence is caused by the inconsistent application of many of the terms.

Ashworth & Saxton describe some of the inconsistencies in British uses of each term. For example, the British Further Education Staff College's *Guide to Work-based Learning Terms* suggests that

> [t]here is frequently confusion between competence and performance ... (In fact) competence is a quality possessed by an individual as a result of learning. A performance is the expression or demonstration of that competence in some particular circumstance ... (in Ashworth & Saxton 1990:10).

However, as Ashworth & Saxton point out, the British Training Agency itself

> defines competence in a manner which does not distinguish it from performance, but rather states that competence *is* performance: 'It is a description of an action, behaviour, or outcome which the person should be able to demonstrate (*ibid.*).

Similar problems plague the South African debates. For example, the HSRC document which provides the conceptual map described under Section 2.3.1.1 above carefully glosses competence as 'a *capacity* for continuous performance' (1995:2), but later suggests that competence refers to the integrated *application* of capabilities' (*ibid.*:54, my emphases).

2.3.1.3 THE INADEQUATE THEORISATION OF COMPETENCE

A third set of problems in the attempt to define competence is the issue that the concept has been inadequately theorised (see Ashworth & Saxton 1990 for an overview of the theoretical problems). My perception is that this is the major source of confusion in all our policy debates, and that we will struggle to make progress until we have a rigorously theorised notion of what it is we will be teaching, testing, accrediting, etc.

The issue is particularly pressing since the present confusion is providing the space for 'old dichotomies [i.e. education and training] to appear in new guises' (Silver, in Ashworth & Saxton 1990:8), and hence for education and training in South Africa to escape the transformational imperative embodied in the NQF vision.

Spady, himself an influential CBET theorist, complains that

> this CBE bandwagon cannot be accused of having put its conceptual house in order before launching on its uncharted parade route and accumulating a vast and lively following. Aside from universal beliefs in the desirability of school system accountability and student "competence", the adherents and practitioners ... are marching (or parading) in different uniforms to different drummers playing different tunes (in Sheaff s.a.:3).

There are two central problems in the theorisation of competence. The first is the neglect of context, the second is the inadequate (and possibly misconceived) representation of the relationship of the elements of competence to one another.

On the neglect of context, Norris has noted that

> [r]eflecting the dominance of psychological research and explanation in education the concept of competence has been largely stripped of its social content and context ... reduced to functions and tasks, construed as clusters of general or universal abilities, or defined as integrated deep structures ... (in Marginson 1995:246).

This is a very serious critique, which links to Ashworth & Saxton claim that 'competencies are excessively individualistic' (1990:13):

> the notion of competence as usually applied focuses attention in learning and assessment on the *individual*. In the world of serious and fateful action, the upshot of human activity is very typically not the result of the behaviour of any one individual, or even of a team whose separate contributions are identifiable, but of a group *as such* (*ibid.*).

Ashworth & Saxton also complain that competence is 'atomistic'. Here they are referring to the inadequate theorisation of the relationship of elements of competence to one another. Discussions of competence typically focus on what 'makes up' competence, the ingredients needed to bake the cake. An important critique of this view of competence is that it does not tell us anything about the relationship between the ingredients:

> ... the way in which complex activities are "made up" of elements of competence is unspecified ... (Ashworth & Saxton 1990:11).

> ... the idea of specifying elements of competence which are understood to sum to produce an overall competence is fraught with difficulty (*ibid.*:13).

Policy analysts in South Africa have understood this critique, and *Ways of Seeing the NQF* is very careful to describe a shift away from the 'recipe' or 'additive' view of competence toward what is called an 'integrated' view of competence. However, there is no adequate theorisation (either in South Africa or, evidently, elsewhere) of what 'integration' actually means, or ways in which the concept of integration helps to represent the relationship between the component parts of competence.

For example, competence is thought to be an 'integration' of knowledge and abilities within a value framework. Yet the *boundaries* between each of these is unclear, let alone the relationship between them. Messick's description of knowledge demonstrates some of the problems involved in distinguishing knowledge from abilities:

> At issue is not merely the amount of knowledge accumulated but its organisation or structure as a functional system for productive thinking,

> problem-solving, and creative invention ... The individual's structure of knowledge is a critical aspect of ... achievement ... A person's structure of knowledge in a subject area includes not only declarative knowledge about substance (or information about *what*), but also procedural knowledge about methods (or information about *how*) and strategic knowledge about alternatives for goal-setting and planning (or information about *which, when* and possibly *why*) ... Knowledge structure refers basically to the structure of relationships among concepts. But as knowledge develops, these structures rapidly go beyond classifications of concepts and classes to include organised systems of relationships or schemas (Messick, in Wolf 1989:42).

Similar problems are presented by the analysis of 'values'. In an overview of new conceptions of thinking, Perkins *et al.* agree that 'considerable research over the past 30 years suggests that sophisticated thinking virtually always reflects a rich knowledge base in the domain in question' (1993:71). However, they also suggest that 'what emerges from these and other contemporary writings about the character of thinking is an enriched ontology of mind, a more panoramic picture of the kinds of mindware that figure importantly in thinking' (*ibid.*:76). One such kind of mindware is what they call 'thinking dispositions':

> In general, *dispositions* can be defined as people's tendencies to put their capabilities into action ... What often distinguishes good from average thinkers is not simply superior cognitive ability, but rather their thinking dispositions — their abiding tendencies to be mindful, invest mental effort, explore, inquire, organise thinking, take intellectual risks, and so on. A dispositional account of thinking thus challenges the dominant general processes view, which focuses on abilities ... (*ibid.*:75).

Dispositions are an affective factor which 'depend considerably on underlying values and belief structures, so acquiring and sustaining them requires the assimilation of value and belief systems. For example, the disposition to be open-minded rests on values and beliefs about the importance of acknowledging other perspectives ...' (*ibid.*:78).

The inadequate treatment of values in *Ways of Seeing The NQF* reflects the difficulties which the authors had in conceptualising competence. The term (a 'keyword') is not glossed; it is sometimes represented as 'values/attitudes' (*ibid.*:41), sometimes as 'value frameworks' (*ibid.*:44), sometimes (in the discussions which led to the book) as affective factors more broadly conceptualised than either values or attitudes. The significance of 'values' appears not to have been fully understood. Apart from their significance as the paradigm within which education and training practice is located, the link between values and thinking dispositions makes them central to what our policy debates call 'transfer'. In developing a flexible workforce, the key issue is how to enable the transfer of knowledge and skills from

one context to another. Thinking dispositions are perhaps the key feature of learning to transfer (a colleague of mine, Caroline Kerfoot, alerted me to this), and are the factor which enables the transfer of other features. The overall policy objectives thus depend on 'values' in ways that have apparently not yet been appreciated.

In sum, it seems to me that the fundamental problem is that competence has been conceptualised *mechanistically*, whereas of course it is an attribute of an *organism*. Organisms are composed of elements in very different ways to the ways in which mechanical apparatuses are composed:

> Any behaviour is a "meaningful Gestalt"; a whole in which the individual elements affect each other in a manner that changes their nature. The elements of skill are not recognisable or separable from the complex whole (Ashworth & Saxton 1990:12).

In seeking a way forward, I suspect that we might find metaphors and explanatory models drawn from the biological sciences more useful than those we presently use; and that this may significantly affect the ways in which we use the concept of competence in our education and training practice.

2.3.1.4 A CONTINUUM OF DEFINITIONS

Having described some of the difficulties in defining competence in South Africa and having provided a sketch of some of the terms and definitions, I would like to point to a widely recognised continuum of definitions which distinguishes CBET programmes from one another. Watters (1993:21) describes a continuum between 'hardliners' and 'softliners'; more conventionally, Chappell (1995:5-7) describes 'narrow' and 'broad' views.

Narrow views of competence typically focus on demonstrable skills; broad views of competence include at least the knowledge and affective factors commonly believed to underlie effective skills acquisition, and sometimes also include experience and the ability to transfer competence to new contexts. Proponents of a narrow view often conflate competence with performance, whereas proponents of a broad view sometimes argue for elements of competence which are not directly measurable.

Although current opinion in South Africa and elsewhere still ranges along the full spectrum of this continuum, historically the shift has been from narrow views (dominant in the early part of this century) toward broader views. Chappell, reporting on a recent literature review in Australia, claims that 'there is almost total support from commentators for a conception of competence more broadly defined' (*ibid.*). McGrath's analysis is that

> [o]ne issue to emerge from both the English and the Australian experiences is that South Africa must conceive of competencies in a broader way than initially developed in those countries ... (1995:9).

Broad views of competence tend to be defined along the lines of the British Further Education Unit (FEU) definition:

> ... the possession and development of sufficient skills, knowledge, appropriate attitudes and experience for successful performance in life roles (FEU, in Harris 1993:3).

Within South Africa, various industry-based groups who have used competency-based training programmes have often followed narrower definitions; but within policy work toward national curricula and the NQF, we have followed a broad definition for some time (see Section 2.3.1.1 above). USWE's definition, widely quoted because of its influence on curriculum debates, was:

> a competency is a capacity in the sense of "the potential to do something". It is not easily fixed or observable (USWE 1994:1).

It should be evident from these definitions that the broad formulation of competence holds it to be a construct. A construct is

> a term used in psychology to label underlying skills or attributes. A construct is an explanatory device, so-called because it is a theoretical construction about the nature of human behaviour (Gipps 1994:6).

A construct is not *directly* measurable. We can directly measure human behaviour, but we cannot directly measure the capacity which accounts for that behaviour. Rather, we use the behaviour as *evidence* for the existence of a capacity:

> ... competence is a construct. So, too, are knowledge and understanding, and so are skills. Thus, we can actually agree that knowledge and understanding contribute to competence, while being unable directly to observe or measure any one of these three (Wolf 1989:41).

> Performance is what is directly observable, whereas competence is not directly observable, rather it is inferred from performance. This is why competencies were defined as combinations of attributes that underlie successful performance (Gonczi, in Brindley, 1994:43).

2.3.2 *Prescriptive vs. heuristic uses of competence*

A second continuum which differentiates CBET programmes from one another is the continuum between prescriptive and heuristic uses of competence. Unlike the continuum described in Section 2.3.1 above, this continuum is seldom explicitly recognised in the literature (the closest distinction is perhaps that referred to in Section 2.3.3, between teachers who are competency *oriented* as opposed to those who are competency *driven*). However, the distinction is at least implicit in many evaluations of CBET programmes and appears to resonate with theoretical formulations of curriculum types (see Section 2.3.4 below).

The prescriptive use of competencies appears to be a very common point of critique in CBET programmes, and links to the sociological critique of CBET as a mechanism for control and surveillance. Prescriptive uses of competencies are those in which

> all teaching and learning activities are related to the development of specific competencies and anything not related has no valid claim for being included in the curriculum (Hertling, in Auerbach, 1986:425).

Marshall's description of CBET in a British context is typical:

> As the performance criteria are completely rigid, the Trainee must perform exactly to the pattern to complete each unit successfully ... If the same model is applied to Higher Education, the results will be disastrous. The prescription so evident in the NCVQ model would be diametrically opposed to the British tradition of academic freedom ... (1991:63).

Brown reaches similar conclusions in his analysis of some Australian programmes:

> curricula in being competency based are also by definition pre-described and pre-descriptive ... These responses ... are about controlling the product and the process. In this case the product is learning and the process is the teaching (1992:17).

Harris, in a wide-ranging review of CBET literature, argues that 'the main assumption behind competence-based education and training is that outcomes sought in education or training can be pre-determined and stated' (1993:1). Her review of criticisms suggests that

> (t)he process of defining competences is said to reflect and reinforce technicist approaches to education and training and as such to be incapable of articulating with issues of transformation; competences once established can become fixed, unambiguous and standardised, thereby constraining and containing attempts to broaden the boundaries of knowledge and skill (*ibid.*:2).

Auerbach provides the clearest distinction between these prescriptive uses and the possible *heuristic* functions of CBET.

> My own view is that we need to make a clear distinction between *competency-based systems*, in which competencies are the starting point and ending point of curriculum development, and *competencies as tools*, in which competencies are one tool among many in the process of enabling students to act for change in their lives (1986:426).

This distinction appears at least to be implicit in many other reviews of CBET programmes; and some of the Australian competency-based language education programmes appear to be designed specifically with a more heuristic use of competencies in mind:

> The [Certificate in English for Speakers of Other Languages] ... aims to allow maximum flexibility, without being overtly prescriptive. As such, the curriculum is a broad framework document with very general learning outcomes. The flexibility has been welcomed by most teachers. However, because of the general nature of the learning outcomes, a great deal of interpretation by the teacher is necessary ... (Coghlan 1995:14).

Burns & Hood, also describing the Australian CSWE, report that teachers

> perceived that rather than being prescriptive, the certificate frameworks could act as guidelines and that the teacher's role was still to take responsibility for curriculum decisions according to their various classroom contexts (1994:86).

The CSWE examples describe how we can avoid using competencies to prescribe to *teachers* what and how they should teach. I (and many other teachers I know) have also used something like competencies in negotiating curriculum objectives with *learners*, in helpful and non-prescriptive ways.

There are at least four criticisms which can be lodged against the prescriptive versions of CBET. The first is that the broad definition of competence cannot be implemented prescriptively. The second, linked to the sociological critique of accountability, is a critique of attempts on the part of administrators, politicians and others to control the content and process of classroom practice. The third is that prescriptive forms of CBET would appear to undermine the NQF principle of 'flexibility'. The fourth is the understanding of the roles of teacher and learner which underlies prescriptive CBET programmes. The first three issues I deal with immediately below, the fourth I touch on later in this paper (see White in 2.3.4 below).

First, there is a strong argument that defining competence broadly (as we have done in South Africa) *requires* us to shift to a more heuristic use of competency statements:

> The broader view of competency-based learning does not confuse performance with competence, and argues that a large variety of attributes which underpin performance must be addressed in any competency analysis. It rejects single acceptable outcomes as being indicative of competent performance, proposing that in most situations multi-variable contexts inevitably lead to multi-variable acceptable outcomes. It argues that the processes undertaken by the worker during work activity are often a more valid indicator of competence than the products or outcomes of work. It emphasises human agency and social interrelations in competency descriptions. It regards competence as developmental and elaborative rather than static and minimalist ... it views descriptions of competence as being open to re-negotiation and change ... (Chappell 1995:8).

On Chappell's analysis, broad definitions of competence therefore *cannot* successfully be implemented prescriptively, since the outcomes are multi-variable and contextually specific, and usually cannot be centrally pre-specified.

Second, the sociological critique of accountability (discussed in Section 2.2.2.1 above) manifests itself in the educational context as a tension between the educational and administrative functions of assessment. Gipps notes a widespread 'tension between assessment for accountability purposes and to support learning':

> In a review of assessment for the OECD the two key themes were:
>
> 1 Testing national standards, a new political imperative: the use of assessment for monitoring and accountability in national systems ...
>
> 2 New approaches to assessment, a paradigm shift towards integrating assessment with learning: continuous assessment using pupils' regular work rather than formal examinations or standardised tests, records of achievement, portfolios, practical tasks, school-based assessment by teachers and self-assessment by pupils, using results as feedback to help define objectives and encourage learners to take responsibility for their own learning.
>
> Theme 1 may be seen as in conflict with Theme 2, the second being favoured by the professionals in education, against pressure for the first from politicians, parents and administrators. As a result, there is an ideological divide between those who hope to raise standards by more extensive testing and those who hope to improve the quality of learning by changing assessment methods (Gipps 1994:162).

It seems to me that we are experiencing this tension in some of the contexts in which CBET is being implemented in South Africa. For example, the IEB is providing a much-needed formal assessment and certification for the adult education field. Yet the competency-based examinations which they provide are wanted by different people for different purposes. Employers, programme administrators, donors and politicians often want assessment as a way of controlling and/or evaluating what happens in classrooms. Educators typically want to use assessment as a way of focusing classroom practice, using their own or learners' judgements as a guiding factor. In preparation for this paper, I interviewed a few adult educators about the effect of the IEB examinations on their practice. While acknowledging the value of the examinations (in formalising their understanding of what they were doing in class, in providing a much-needed accreditation, etc.), teachers working in quite different contexts expressed dissatisfaction with the way in which the examinations were being used to constrain what they taught in class:

> Sometimes you know your learners need to do something, but its not in the exam so you can't do it (Teacher working for a local government ABET programme, interview 1995).
>
> I've spoken to all the teachers, and its all the same. Its IEB, IEB, all IEB ... (Teacher mentor working on technikon teacher training diploma course, interview 1995).

I do not in any way intend this as a criticism of the IEB itself: the problem in this instance is not a problem with the examinations set by the IEB, but with the prescriptive way in which these examinations are being used narrowly to define curriculum and teaching practice. Apart from whether or not such prescription promotes the broad forms of competence suggested by recent national policy proposals, I believe that it will damage the reform initiative in the eyes of learners and teachers alike, and ultimately serve the interests of programme administrators and bureaucrats alone.

The third criticism of prescriptive forms of CBET is that it would contradict the NQF principle of 'flexibility' (see Section 2.2.1.3). This principle is that 'education and training ... should permit the flexibility of interpretation required to meet the needs of industry and service sectors, providers and learners' (NTB 1993:10). It is worth noting that I was alerted to this during a development project in which I was working with adults in the rural areas, who felt that certain of the current trends in national policy did not in fact meet their needs.

2.3.3 *Technicist vs. holistic views of CBET*

A third way of distinguishing CBET programmes from one another is by ranging them along a continuum from technicist through to more holistic views of education. Technicism in education is

> expressed in the view that theory is inherently superior to common-sense experience, that the future can be anticipated in terms of technological innovation, that the perfection of human nature is essentially a problem in engineering more adequate social environments, that quality rather than equity is the basic moral problem and that it can be solved through a legalistic (expert knowledge) approach, and that communities are simply social systems or collectives that can be redesigned by well-intentioned theorists. As a categorical mode of thought, it ignores the complexity of experience (Bowers, in Buckland 1984:373).

Buckland comments that

> [a] key assumption of the technicist mode of rationality is that the deductive-nomological model of explanation, the model most closely associated with the natural sciences, with its interest in explanation, prediction and technical control, is seen as vastly superior to the hermeneutic principles underlying

> "speculative" social theory. The positivism implicit in this involves the assumption that social science theory can and ought to be objective, that the relationship between theory and practice in the domain of social science is primarily a technical one in that social science theory can be used to predict how a course of action can best be realised ... When applied to education these assumptions lead to the emergence of an instrumentalist tradition in which progress is seen in terms of technological "growth" and learning is reduced to the mastery of skills and the solving of practical problems (*ibid.*:372).

Typically coincident with narrow definitions of competence and their prescriptive implementation, technicism has manifested itself recently in assessment-led reform movements in the tendency to see rationally planned assessment systems as a sufficient condition for effecting educational reform. This seriously misunderstands

> the complex relationship between assessment change, support systems for teachers' professional development, curriculum development and teacher training (Little 1992:131).

I would like here to describe just three of the kinds of factors which necessarily complement assessment reform in achieving educational change. The first is teacher development, the second is curriculum reform, and the third (entailed also by the other two) is resources. In describing these factors, I do not mean to imply that the scope of technicist planning should be broadened to include them. Of course, attention needs to be paid to factors other than assessment; and in South Africa we have not done so sufficiently. However, the difference between technicist and holistic approaches lies more in recognising the limitations of centralised planning, pointing rather to a need for dialogue between central and local concerns, between building systems and meeting the contextually-specific needs of individuals:

> Perhaps the big mistake in education policy is the strange dichotomy that developed during the 1990s which placed policy as something which is forced at the centre and implementation as something which is done in the provinces. It is an absurd notion because policy and implementation constantly and continuously interact and thus policy cannot be developed in one place and implemented in another (Buckland 1995:44).

The issues around teacher development exemplify this argument. Hargreaves claims that

> ... we have come to realise in recent years that the teacher is the ultimate key to educational change and school improvement. The restructuring of schools, the composition of national and provincial curricula, the development of bench-mark assessments — all these things are of little value if they do not take the teacher into account. Teachers don't merely deliver the curriculum. They develop it, define it and reinterpret it too. It is what teachers think,

> what teachers believe and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get. Growing appreciation of this fact is placing working with teachers and understanding teaching at the top of our research and improvement agendas (in Smyth, 1995:vii).

White, in an analysis of the kinds of curriculum and assessment which I believe are entailed in a broad definition of competence (see Section 2.3.4 below) suggests that these reforms pre-suppose

> ... the existence of a professional teaching force that can be trusted to deliver quality learning that is in the interests of the individual learners and the state (1992:161).

One implication of these comments for the South African NQF is that substantial teacher support and development will be necessary to achieve the kinds of education and training reforms which are desired. A second is that the character of this support cannot simply be to tell teachers what they should do. Rather, it will need also to equip teachers with the (broadly defined!) competence they will need to interpret the policy frameworks in ways which are sensitive to the varied needs and contexts of their learners.

The issues in curriculum development are similar to those in teacher development. First, there is a close relationship between the two; second, assessment reform is often dangerous without curriculum development.

On the relationship between curriculum and teacher development, Burns & Hood report from their review of the CSWE programme that

> organisationally supported professional development structures are crucial to effective curriculum change (1994:76).

Hargreaves claims that if

> the possibilities for local curriculum development and teacher involvement are pre-empted by central curriculum prescription; and if teacher collaboration and collegiality is confined to the technical details of what the North Americans call programme implementation, it is unlikely that much development will take place, be it development of the curriculum, or development of the teacher (1990:163).

On the link between curriculum and assessment reform, he argues that there are

> ... serious objections to assessment-led reform *unless* it is developed with a clear sense of curricular purpose (*ibid.*:114).

On the same issue, Little has claimed that

> [t]o argue that effective curricula are de facto assessment-led is one thing; to argue that assessment guidelines can and should be considered in isolation

> from curricula ... is quite another. Assessment practice may indeed drive curriculum practice, but assessment without curriculum is like riding a headless horse. The debate about assessment and curriculum in many developing countries was stimulated in the 1970's by the realisation that several attempts at curriculum change (often Western-inspired) were failing at the implementation stage because the assessment of curriculum objectives was out of line with the curriculum objectives themselves. Assessment, it was argued, was constraining the curriculum. Change in assessment came to be seen as a necessary condition for change in curriculum. It should not, however, be seen as a sufficient condition (1992:131).

Finally, I would like to point to the resources required for effective educational change, because I believe that there is a fundamentally technicist tendency in our policy debates to propose reform strategies almost entirely without reference to the often ill-resourced contexts in which they will need to be implemented. Reporting on the CSWE programme, Dalton and Bottomley ask

> [w]hy were teachers able to become competency *oriented* rather than competency *driven*? ... Central managements perception of the [Certificate in Spoken and Written Englishs] value made it the organisation's first priority, *providing sufficient resources to support the implementation* (1994:74-5, emphasis mine).

2.3.4 *CBET curricula*

It should be evident from my analysis of CBET thus far that CBET curricula are likely to vary, depending on the definition of competence used, on the prescriptive or heuristic use of the definition, and on the technicist or holistic philosophy of education underlying the programme. This characterisation is, I believe, resonant with theoretical formulations of curriculum types. Below I describe the distinction in curriculum theory which I believe supports my description of a CBET continuum. I then describe recent views of teaching and learning, which I believe make the case for 'interactive' approaches to curriculum. I qualify this by looking at critiques of interactive curricula.

2.3.4.1 PREACTIVE VS. INTERACTIVE CURRICULA

Goodson reviews the work of a number of influential curriculum theorists and explores a theme common to many of them. He explains the distinction between 'preactive' and 'interactive' realisations of curriculum with reference to Greene's work. Greene distinguishes between the dominant (preactive) view of curriculum as

> a structure of socially presented knowledge, external to the knower, there to be mastered (in Goodson 1988:13),

and an interactive view of curriculum which is

> a possibility for the learner as an existing person mainly concerned with making sense of his (sic) own life world (*ibid.*).

This distinction has been made under many different names. For example, Kelly characterises curricula as

- 'curriculum as content and education as transmission', or
- 'curriculum as product and education as instrumental', or
- 'curriculum as process and education as development' (1989).

The first two of these are preactive (the second being something like narrow and prescriptive CBET curricula); the third is an interactive view. There is a tendency to see CBET curricula as being preactive; but it should be evident from my review that there is an increasing trend toward interactive views of CBET curriculum.

Preactive views of curricula have been criticised for their tendency to limit (and sometimes undermine) the potential outcomes of learning: in pre-specifying the outcomes, the curriculum limits the learning to these outcomes. Thus Auerbach, probably the finest exponent of interactive curricula in language teaching, quotes Stenhouse's claim that

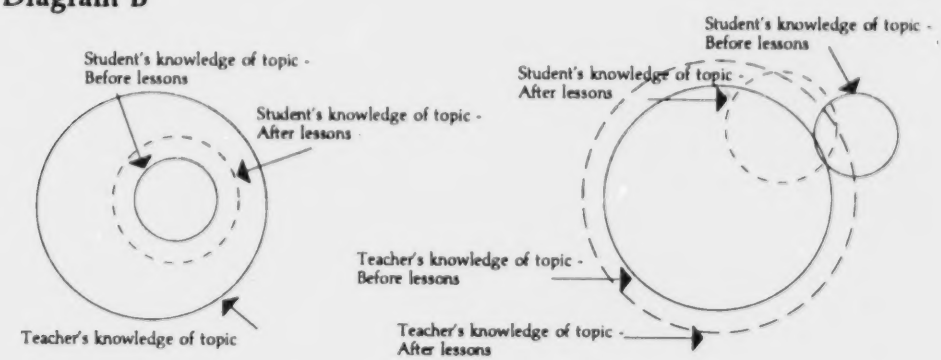
> [e]ducation as induction into knowledge is successful to the extent that it makes the behavioural outcomes of the students *unpredictable* (in 1992:20).

Ashworth & Saxton cite Elbow in support of their more limited claim that '[t]he inclusion, in a teaching programme, of clear-cut competences to be achieved may hinder *certain* kinds of learning and teaching' (1990:18, my emphasis).

2.3.4.2 RESEARCH INTO LEARNING SUPPORTS INTERACTIVE VIEWS

The trend toward interactive views of curriculum is driven partly by recent views of the teaching/learning process, which suggest that interactive curricula are in any event a more accurate characterisation of what happens in any class. The diagram below illustrates recent views of the relationship between a teachers and learner's knowledge before and after a lesson:

Diagram B


Student's knowledge of topic - Before lessons
Student's knowledge of topic - After lessons
Teacher's knowledge of topic
Student's knowledge of topic - Before lessons
Student's knowledge of topic - After lessons
Teacher's knowledge of topic - Before lessons
Teacher's knowledge of topic - After lessons

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White argues that

> [t]he shift in perception of teaching and learning encapsulated [in the diagram] has profound implications for the curriculum and for assessment. The Part A view conceives of the curriculum as a body of information that can be specified in detail and delivered to the learner. Assessment consists in checking whether the information has been received. People who subscribe to the Part A view will see no objections to central control of the curriculum extending to detailed prescription of what should be taught. The Part A view implies that the curriculum can be defined quite specifically.
>
> The Part B view implies that the curriculum should be defined loosely. Whatever central control there is should concern itself with broad rather than detailed guides to content ... The implication of the Part B view is *not* that behavioural objectives and tightly specified curricula are useless, but that they cannot cover all the desirable outcomes of schooling ...' (White 1992:161).

In relation to the continuum of CBET curricula which I have described, White's analysis implies that competencies should not be used prescriptively, but should rather guide teaching and learning practice.

2.3.4.3 QUALIFYING 'INTERACTIVE' CURRICULA – THE CASE FOR COMPETENCIES AS HEURISTICS

Extreme interactive views of curriculum themselves have been subject to critique. One criticism has been that they potentially mystify knowledge by treating it simplistically as the product of a dialogue, thereby obscuring the institutional character of knowledge. Another has been that it is often very difficult to get good interactive practice right.

Young distinguishes between curriculum as fact and curriculum as practice (something like the preactive/interactive distinction). He critiques *both* views as potentially mystifying. The 'curriculum as fact'

> needs to be seen as more than mere illusion, a superficial veneer on teachers' and pupils' classroom practice, but as a historically specific social reality expressing particular production relations among men (sic). It is mystifying in the way it presents the curriculum as having a life of its own, and obscures the human relations in which it, as any conception of knowledge, is embedded, leaving education as neither understandable nor controllable by men (*cited in Goodson 1988:13*).

Whereas the 'curriculum as practice'

> reduces the social reality of "curriculum" to the subjective interventions and actions of teachers and pupils. This limits us from understanding the historical emergence and persistence of particular conceptions of knowledge and particular conventions (school subjects for example). In that we are

> limited from being able to situatise the problems of contemporary education historically we are again limited from understanding and control (*ibid.*).

A different kind of critique of an extreme interactive view of curriculum is simply that it is difficult to implement. Nunan cites a teacher working on a needs-based learner-centred curriculum model:

> We have got eclecticism of learners in the class, eclecticism of methodology and eclecticism of learning content ... so when I am faced with planning my course, I am faced with these bits and pieces. And how you actually integrate that and work out what are the real needs of students is something that I am still very much at a loss to know (in Hagan 1994:30).

It is worth noting that USWE moved away from an extreme learner-centred model for similar reasons, and that many development groups nationally who are committed to participatory curricula find that they nevertheless need some guiding framework for their practice. This is the potential role of competencies — as heuristics which help us to find direction in any particular context rather than prescribing what we should do in every context.

2.3.5 *CBET assessment*

Assessment, like curriculum, is one of the key features of CBET. (Wolf (1989), Docking (1994:12-15) and Brindley (1994) include useful overviews of CBET approaches to assessment.) In South Africa, assessment and curricula are the only two aspects of CBET to receive much attention, since they are at the fulcrum of the proposed education and training reforms.

The central feature of CBET assessment is that it is criterion-referenced, rather than norm-referenced. Norm-referencing (the dominant form of assessment in education in South Africa) entails assigning learners a grade by comparing them (at least implicitly) to each other. Criterion-referenced assessment entails measuring learners' work against a set of criteria which are independent of the performance of other learners in the group. There is an increasing challenge to this distinction, based on research which demonstrates that forms of criterion-referenced assessment often finesse standards by using some sort of normative comparison (Messick, in Wood 1988:200), or that norm-referenced assessment often uses implicit disciplinary or other criteria. I worry that in South Africa, many of our criterion-referenced initiatives have not understood this issue, and sell old wine (norm-referencing) in new bottles (criterion-referencing). Gipps echoes the current trend in research when she writes that

> [w]e need to move the debate away from false dichotomies: criterion-referenced assessment versus norm-referenced assessment ... (1994:163).

However, criterion-referenced assessment is still widely seen as more reliable than other forms of assessment. Even using traditional measures of test construction

(Gipps describes the recent shifts away from notions such as validity, reliability and generalisability toward 'trustworthiness' and 'authenticity'), Ashworth & Saxton have argued against the claim that criterion-referenced assessment is more valid or reliable:

> ... the fact that comparatively clear statements of outcome are laid down as assessment criteria (and we set aside for the moment the issue of the intrinsic quality of such statements) has beguiled some into thinking that they are now in possession of a thoroughly reliable and valid assessment scheme. This is a serious misunderstanding. Logically prior to any question of the reliability and validity of an assessment instrument is the question of the human and social process of *assessing*. Assessing involves the perception of evidence about performance by an assessor and the arrival at a decision concerning the level of performance of the person being assessed. This is a radically interpersonal series of events, in which there is enormous, unavoidable scope for subjectivity — especially when the competences being assessed are relatively intangible ones to do with social and personal skills, or ones in which the individual's performance is intimately connected with the context ... Whether a person's actions will be seen, for example, as showing initiative, pushiness or uppishness will depend largely on the person's relationship with the assessor, or on the context ... the specification of assessment criteria in competence terms is unlikely to affect the degree of subjectivity in assessment one jot (1990:23).

Docking offers a cogent critique of current (non-CBET) assessment practices; but the implication of his analysis for me is that the criterial differences in the effectiveness of assessment practices (traditional or competency-based) lie more in the degree of rigour with which they are approached than in the paradigm within which they are conceptualised. He argues that

> [t]he comparison is between rigorous and detailed management of competency development and assessment through the process on the one hand (competency-based teaching and assessment), and "loosely" defined evidence which is "doctored" and legitimated through statistical procedures on the other (traditional teaching and assessment) (1994:15).

Assessment within CBET tends in practice to vary along the same continua as curriculum. Versions of criterion-referenced assessment range from *measurement* models (where the performance criteria are specified in detail and the assessment process entails checking the degree to which the criteria have been met) through to *evidence* models (where the criteria are broadly described and the assessment process requires inferring competence from performance). Measurement models of assessment thus presuppose a narrow definition and prescriptive use of competencies. The broad definition of competence requires an assessment process in which the assessor collects

> ... evidence that can "support" an inferential leap from an observed consistency (in the evidence) to a construct that accounts for that consistency ... (Wolf 1989:40).

This approach is consistent with Whites description of recent approaches to learning (see diagram in 2.3.4.2 above). White argues that

> [u]nder the Part A view, there is no harm in centrally controlled examinations that consist entirely of reliable and highly specific questions. Under Part B, any examination must allow for a large amount of, if not total, control being in the hands of individual teachers or even to some degree students, because that is the only way in which the *diverse* understandings can be plumbed ... The implication that diverse procedures of assessment are necessary follows from the perception that understanding is complex, involving not just amount of knowledge but its type, interlinking, availability and applicability. No one procedure measures well all these attributes (White 1992:161).

This is also the reasoning behind Wolf's claim that

> [w]e should not pretend that performance criteria ... can be used to generate functionally identical assessment procedures ... It makes much more sense to see the assessment of competence as involving alternative ways of amassing adequate evidence using a collection of different sources ... Indeed, thinking about assessment in these 'evidence accretion' terms is crucially important to the whole competence-based approach ... It is also, of course, very close to the way in which many educational judgements are already reached in practice, especially at post-graduate level (1989:48).

This shift toward 'evidence accretion' has happened in educational assessment broadly (i.e. not only in CBET). Gipps provides a lucid overview, arguing that

> Assessment is undergoing a paradigm shift, from psychometrics to a broader model of educational assessment, from a testing and examination culture to an assessment culture. There is a wider range of assessment in use now than there was twenty-five years ago: teacher assessment, standard tasks, coursework, records of achievement as well as practical and oral assessment, written examinations and standardised tests. There is criterion-referenced assessment, formative assessment and performance-based assessment, as well as norm-referenced testing. In addition, assessment has taken on a high profile and is required to achieve a wide range of purposes: it has to support teaching and learning, provide information about pupils, teachers and schools, act as a selection and certificating device, as an accountability procedure, and drive curriculum and teaching. These new forms and range of purposes for assessment mean that the major traditional model underpinning theory, the psychometric model, is no longer adequate, hence the paradigm shift (Gipps 1994:1).

Gipps claims of the new paradigm that it

> recognises that domains and constructs are multi-dimensional and complex; that assessing achievement is not an exact science; and that the interaction of pupil, task and context is sufficiently complex to make generalisation to other tasks and contexts dubious (*ibid.*:159).

2.3.6 *CBET teaching/learning practices*

I distinguished earlier between the use of competencies to set, assess and evaluate standards for education and training; and their use for implementing such standards. CBET, as teaching/learning practices, also ranges along a continuum in which (on the one hand) competencies may be used to define a discrete set of stages through which learning must necessarily progress; and (on the other hand) as an educational process in which competencies play a role (often in consultation with learners) in determining the content and process of education. This continuum obviously parallels the continua I have described between preactive/interactive curricula, measurement/evidence models of assessment, behaviourist/broad definitions, etc.

Descriptions of CBET 'pedagogy' generally describe what is commonly known as 'mastery learning' — a set of practices in which the learning process is broken into small component parts which are sequentially organised. Educationists generally reject such approaches, and trainers generally reject the less clearly defined approach adopted by educationists:

> Those of us who know where they are going, and can define the path that leads there, are in the business of training, whereas those who neither know their destination nor the means of getting there are in the business of education (Romiszowski 1981:3).

Auerbach's concession to the potential value of competencies as 'tools' is characteristic of the educational approach, as is Tumpowsky's conclusion that

> [i]t would be hasty to conclude that behavioural objectives have no place at all in foreign language instruction; it seems likely that some sort of specific, yet open-ended, objectives may prove to be very effective (1984:306).

It seems to me that using competencies to set standards does not entail moving to mastery by learning pedagogy, currently the newest *gevaar* in South African education. Further, it does not appear to me that using competencies to set and assess standards should require us to move to *any* sort of CBET pedagogy. This option is certainly open to us, and I believe that there are good reasons for a shift in many domains to the use of competencies in ways that Auerbach and Tumpowsky are referring to. However, this is not entailed in the envisaged reforms. For example, the IEB is widely seen as an NQF pilot in certain domains,

yet is using a criterion-referenced framework to assess the adult basic education field (almost *entirely* a field without CBET pedagogies).

I would like to point to the demands which CBET pedagogies place on teachers and trainers, not by way of rejecting them so much as a cautionary note on the manner in which they are introduced. For example, the impact of CBET reforms on the Australian education system is that teachers reported

> a somewhat negative experience [around teaching duties]: teaching load too heavy; inadequate time for preparation; difficulties in supervising so many students at different levels and undertaking various competencies, and lack of time to spend with individual students. Some expressed consternation at the difficulty of knowing everything, all the time, as various students could be working on different parts of the syllabus at the same time ... (Candy & Harris 1990:55).

Bennell's analysis of the impact in the South African training system is that

> [t]he practical difficulties of switching over the CBMT are generally well appreciated. In particular, "the role of the instructor" differs considerably from that required in the conventional show, tell and do method. The new role is much more demanding and complex and entails more skills than merely those of being a resource. More specifically, the instructor becomes a coach, problem-solver, a controller, an examiner and an administrator. He has to contain his natural desire to "tell it all" and must encourage the learner to solve their own problems (MEIATB, in Bennell 1992:10).

There are many contexts in South Africa in which we may well wish to move to CBET pedagogies, and many in which we do not. Integrating our education and training systems ought not, I believe, to entail homogenising them.

2.3.7 *Summary*

In my review of some of the educational features of CBET, I have characterised the differences between CBET curricula, assessment and teaching/learning practices, as ranging along continua from behaviouristically defined, prescriptively used and technicist programmes through to broadly defined, heuristically used and holistically conceived programmes. I have described the South African proposals as broadly defined and perhaps heuristically intended, but often technicist in their view of the relationship between policy and implementation.

2.4 Summary of Section 2

The purpose of this section of my paper has been to introduce CBET. It has been my argument that CBET is not a uniform body of theory or practice. Rather, the educational theories and practices which make up CBET and the social functions of these practices determine the form which CBET assumes in any context.

CBET in South Africa is likely to be introduced as a mechanism for the comprehensive reform of education and training. The social goals expressed in this agenda appear to have widespread popular support. The definitions of competency which have been adopted in South African policy debates allow for the achievement of these social goals, and will probably require a shift in current conceptions of curriculum, assessment and teaching/learning practices. The technicist orientation of much of the policy work is at odds with the contents of the policy proposals themselves.

3 AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

3.1 Overview of this section

In this section of my paper I review trends in language education, at a very general level. My overview is aimed at establishing the compatibility of language education with the theory and practice of CBET, in the forms being proposed for CBET in South Africa.

In Section 3.2 I document shifts in the theory of what language is. In Section 3.3 I describe shifts in theories of language learning. In Section 3.4 I focus on shifts in our understanding of how to teach language. In each case, my analysis is that we work with far less universal theories of language and language education today, than educators did some 30 years ago. Rather, we have shifted to more contextually-embedded (and therefore, more varied) perspectives and practices.

3.2 Developments in linguistic theory

A widely published article by Larsen-Freeman is titled 'From Unity to Diversity: Twenty-Five Years of Language Teaching Methodology'. As suggested by the title, Larsen-Freemans analysis is that the field of language education is characterised by far more diversity today than it was three decades ago.

One area in which this diversity manifests itself is in theories of what it is that language educators teach. Here, I would like to argue, there are three kinds of diversity. First, we have *more* theories of what language is, actively informing the field of language education. Second, many of these theories *depict* language as a more complex phenomenon than earlier theories — thus recognising more diverse variables as constituting language. Third, the *relationship between these theories and practice* has been increasingly problematised — there are more diverse relationships between theory and practice. I will briefly describe each of these below.

3.2.1 *Theories of what language is*

The dominant mode of analysis to inform theories of language in the 1960s was structuralism; in the 1990s, although post-structuralist and critical theories of language are increasingly widespread, they have not in practice (or, some might argue, even in theory) completely displaced other views.

3.2.2 *The complexity of language as represented by theory*

Many of the theories of language which currently inform language education represent language as a more complex and contingent phenomenon than did earlier theories. These theories have been precipitated both by shifts in philosophy and social studies, and by empirical advances in the study of language, literacy, cognition, etc.

Crudely, the shifts in our understanding of language may be represented as follows:

- Within structuralist/formalist paradigms, language was seen as a set of forms (and the task of language education was to teach these forms).
- The revolution provoked by Hymess theory of communicative competence broadened theories of language to include not only forms, but the appropriate use of these forms. The grammar studied by linguists now included grammars of social interaction, of sociolinguistic competence. (The task of language education accordingly became focused on helping learners to acquire both formal and (more importantly) functional, i.e. communicative or sociolinguistic competence.)
- Critical and post-structuralist paradigms began to problematise what *counts* as appropriate language use, who decides what counts as appropriate and whose interests 'appropriacy' serves in any context. A metalinguistic awareness of the relationship between language and power (intersecting with feminist, anti-colonialist and other critical sociologies) is now seen as an important ingredient in what it means to know a language. Especially for learners of a language such as English, which is obviously complicit in national and international power relations, the development of a critical language awareness can sometimes determine both the forms of language learned and the usage of such forms.
- In addition, research has pointed to a much closer relationship between language and cognition than earlier theories of language suggested, with the result that effective language skills are now understood to rest on the development of cognition more broadly.

An example from my own teaching experience may help to illustrate the paradigm shifts. When I first began teaching learners how to fill in bank forms, post office forms, etc., I started teaching them the words and sentences on what I thought a

typical form should look like. At this point, I was operating within a formalist paradigm. I soon realised that many forms did not look anything like what I was teaching learners, and that learners needed to know how to *use* what I was teaching them in the real world. This for me was a shift toward a more functionalist communicative approach. As we began using real forms, I was horrified to note the kinds of racist, sexist, heterosexist, classist and other language and information used on or requested by many forms. A dialogue with learners around these issues shifted me into a more critical paradigm, problematising the language I was teaching them. At the same time, I came to realise that many learners did not understand that some forms were informative, others were contractual, etc. — and that teaching someone how to sign their name at the appropriate place on a form could be *dis*empowering unless they understood what the signature committed them to. Teaching learners about contracts entailed exploring the nature of law, the nature of, for example, banks as financial institutions, the affective factors which were necessary to be proactive about their contractual rights, etc. It was only after learners had begun developing a critical understanding of what it meant to fill in a form that I felt confident about their 'competence'.

The consequence of the paradigm shifts described above has been to introduce a wider set of variables into the language classroom: not just language form, not just sociolinguistic competence, not just critical awareness but also the general education base which enables all these skills. Auerbach provides a description of some of these shifts when she writes that

> [l]anguage is no longer seen as only a system of rules or behaviours that have an autonomous existence independent of their usage. The notion of *communicative competence* implies that it is not enough to know the grammar of a language; it is necessary also to know appropriate forms to use as the context changes. According to this view, both grammatical and socio-linguistic knowledge are acquired in the process of meaningful interaction in a range of settings, with a range of purposes, and participants ... Central to recent developments in literacy theory is the notion that literacy practices, like language, are variable, context-dependent, and culture-specific. Until recently, literacy was seen as a monolithic set of neutral skills existing independently of how and where they're used. Literacy was seen to have certain inherent qualities that inevitably lead to higher-order cognitive processing (e.g. logical thinking) and economic advancement ... However, studies of the real-world uses of literacy and literacy acquisition in different settings have revealed that the ways people read and write vary according to the task, the situation, the purpose, and the relationship between reader, writer and setting. Further, the particular practices and beliefs about literacy for a given society depend on a range of cultural, social, and political factors... (1992:14).

This expanded and more sophisticated view of language has manifested itself in different areas of language education. For example, Cummins' early distinction between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) was a recognition that 'language' was not a monolithic entity, but consisted of sets of characteristically different skills. The later refinement of this into a four-way matrix encompassing context-embedded/context-reduced skills on the one axis and cognitively demanding/cognitively undemanding on the other axis, refined the model and pointed even more clearly to the relationships between language, context and cognition. Catherine Snow's work has for me comprehensively shifted the theory informing language in education to a multivariable model able to recognise different configurations of purpose, context, form, etc.

Similarly, the post-structuralist claim that language is 'always and everywhere integrated with social practices' (Gee 1990:xix) ... 'being inherently "dialogic", [language] is always the site of ideological contestation' (Gardiner 1992:7) has led us to the view that

> ... meaning shifts from one context to another at different times and in different places. Meaning is not "owned" by the speaker/writer, by the linguistic system, or by the hearer/reader; it is a product of speaker, sign, and hearer, all of which are enmeshed in time, place and society. This is not necessarily a consensual space ... (Norton Pierce 1989:111).

Smith's elegant (albeit strong) formulation of the paradigm shift precipitated by this view is that

> [w]e do not understand words by deriving meaning from them, but by bringing meaning to them (in Roberts *et al.* 1992:6).

Within language education, such views of language manifest themselves in shifts from 'bottom-up' views of reading acquisition and language processing toward 'top-down' and 'interactive' views. The rise of genre analysis and schema theory support top-down views, but the empirical evidence supporting strong bottom-up views of reading (Grabe 1991:384) contradict them. Again, therefore, the trend is toward broader, more complex and multivariable views of language — but the shift has not been definitive.

3.2.3 *The relationship between theory and practice*

Over the past three decades, the relationship between theory and practice has shifted from theory telling practice what to do, toward a more diverse set of relationships. Widdowson writes that

> [t]heories of language, its development as a mental construct and its operation in social life, have had an enormous influence on how teachers of second languages have conceived of their subject (1990:74).

However, the relationship between theoreticians and practitioners/researchers and teachers/*institutional* theory and practice, has been increasingly problematised. Raimes cites Shulman on 'the wisdom of practice' and Prabhu on 'a teacher's sense of plausibility about teaching' and 'pedagogic intuition' when she writes that

> better than putting the research into a teaching context is for teachers to become researchers themselves. Classroom-based research and action research is increasingly recommended to decrease teachers' reliance on theorists and researchers (1991:423).

3.3 Shifts in the study of language acquisition

Larsen-Freeman suggests that

> the prevailing view of the language-learning process in 1962 was that learning was achieved through habit formation (Larsen-Freeman 1987:3).

As in the case of theories of language, there are more theories about how language is acquired, these theories themselves tend to be more complex, and the influences on language acquisition theory are more varied.

First, theories of language acquisition have proliferated to the point where models and theories overlap and draw on each other.

Second, the theories and models themselves are more complex. Although there is a broad acceptance that

> it is the creative exploitation of language to achieve purposeful outcomes which generates the learning process itself (Widdowson 1990:122),

the variety of contextual, cognitive, linguistic and other variables modulating the acquisition process are increasingly reflected in models of language acquisition. For example, the Multi-Dimensional Model recognises that some linguistic forms are acquired in developmental sequence, others are not:

> the main point to be made about developmental sequences and stages of development is that this concept only applies to a restricted range of structures. This finding forms the basis for a model of language acquisition in which certain features are arrayed along a developmental axis while others exhibit a degree of free variation which is not commensurate with the notion of development ... This model ... provides a means of understanding how oral proficiency rating procedures relate to a learner's language production and, tentatively, of how phenomena such as fossilisation or stabilisation occur. This model also provides the teacher with a way of relating the concept of correctness or accuracy to particular features in a learner's speech (Johnston 1987:26).

Third, the influences on language acquisition theory — in the past, mainly psychology and linguistics — have proliferated. The influences on current

language acquisition theory range from humanistic and popular education through to Vygotskyan psychology, empirical studies in language acquisition and neurolinguistics.

3.4 Developments in language teaching

Introductory texts on language teaching methods currently always describe at least half a dozen approaches. Other than dominant trends in the history of language education (grammar translation, audiolingualism, communicative approaches ...), there are a variety of more marginal approaches and methods which are nevertheless widely used (Counselling-Learning, Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, Suggestopaedia, Critical Language Awareness ...).

Thus Larsen-Freemans overview, after describing a 'typical' language class in 1962, suggests that

> [t]here is such methodological diversity in 1987 that it would be impossible to identify a typical class. There is no single acceptable way to go about teaching language today. Indeed, the existing approaches to language teaching differ in fundamental ways. There is little or no accord on syllabus type, on materials used, on the order of skill presentation, on the value of explicit error correction, or even on such a basic issue as the role of the students native language (1987:2).

The current tendency is toward 'principled eclecticism', and there is an increasing body of literature around the kinds of principles which could inform a selection and integration of ideas as the basis for sound educational practice. In part, this is a result of a rebellion against the 'tyranny of theory' described under 3.2.3 above; in part it has grown out of studies of teaching practice which show that methods

> make assumptions about the nature of teaching that are not based on study of the process of teaching (Richards 1990:37).

I would like to quote Richards at some length, for purposes of my later discussion of the compatibility of CBET with language education. Richards expresses the consensus in the field when he writes that

> [t]he basic problem is that methods present a predetermined, packaged deal for teachers that incorporates a static view of teaching. In this view specific teacher roles, learner roles, and teaching/learning activities and processes are imposed on teachers and learners. Studies of classroom events, however, have demonstrated that teaching is not static or fixed in time but is a dynamic, interactional process in which the teacher's "method" results from the processes of interaction between the teacher, the learners, and the instructional tasks and activities over time (*ibid.*).

Raimes, in a widely acclaimed history of approaches to the teaching of writing, argues that

> [o]ur field is too diverse for us to recommend ways of teaching ESL in general. There is no such thing as a generalised ESL student ... (1991:420).

Later in the same article, she writes:

> [w]hile there is still a tendency to discuss our field as if it were the easily definable entity it was 25 years ago, there are signs that we are beginning to recognise the diversity of our students and our mission, and to realise that not all approaches and procedures might apply to all ESL/EFL students ... .The combination of complexity and diversity makes it imperative for us not to seek universal prescriptions, but instead to "strive to validate other, local forms of knowledge about language and teaching (*ibid.*:421-422).

3.5 Summary

Parallel to other developments in social and educational theory, research in language education over the past few decades has increasingly revealed the complex and contingent nature of language use; the multiple processes of language acquisition; and the variety of approaches, methods and techniques which can be used to teach language. Although research and theory are still seen to play an important role in informing effective teaching and learning practices, language education has increasingly devolved the responsibility for finding answers, away from researchers and methodologists toward teachers in the classroom.

4 CBET AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The central and summary claim I would like to make in concluding this paper is that while the current trends in language education are not at all compatible with narrow, prescriptive and technicist forms of CBET, they are not incompatible with broad, heuristic and holistic forms.

CBET is not new to language education. First, the use of behavioural objectives in language education has a long and somewhat chequered history. (See Tumpowsky 1984; Auerbach & Burgess 1985; Auerbach 1986; Tollefson 1986; Burrows 1994; etc.) Second, language education has sometimes been at the forefront of developments in CBET (Docking 1994:12).

However, much of my analysis in this paper has been devoted to exploring the diversity of theory and practice called 'CBET' and 'language education' respectively. Forms of language education three decades ago are highly compatible with forms of CBET from the same generation; and the current drift of CBET is more compatible with the current drift of language education. For example, the trend toward broad, multivariable and contextually embedded forms of competence in CBET parallels the increasing recognition of multiple literacies, multiple intelligences, and multiple linguistic forms and functions in language education. Similarly, the move away from methodological prescription in language

education resonates with the parallel shift toward heuristic uses of competence in CBET. My argument in this paper has been that South Africa appears to be adopting a broad definition of competence, and that this definition is likely to require a heuristic use of competencies and a holistic conception of education and training reform. If CBET does indeed assume this form, it is likely to be at least partly compatible with current views of language education. The Australian programmes appear to support this analysis, although there are significant differences between Australian and South African contexts.

However, if CBET in South Africa adopts a narrower definition of competence, or if competencies are used prescriptively to force educational change without adequately supporting such change, language educators are likely to be unhappy with the scheduled reforms.

It will have been apparent throughout my paper that I have been not merely *describing* the body of theory and practice in CBET; I have also described trends and criticisms, and have adopted a line of argument. Much of my reading around CBET has left me irritated with advocates and opponents who caricature whatever it is they are opposing, setting up straw scarecrows against whom they shadow-box. My line of argument has been to reject behaviouristically defined, prescriptively implemented and technicist views of CBET; but I believe there is sufficient evidence against such theory and practice to do so responsibly and unproblematically. I do not believe that this implies unprincipled practice. Rather, I think that competencies (broadly defined, heuristically implemented and holistically conceived) can be a useful way of helping us to achieve the kinds of education and training reforms we are striving for in South Africa.

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NOTES

1 Staff in USWE work more collaboratively than in many other organisations or institutions. It is therefore not merely for reasons of political correctness that I wish to acknowledge the contribution of USWE staff, teachers and learners to ideas expressed in this paper.

STANDARDS AND LEVELS IN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

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1 INTRODUCTION

The current South African language qualification framework is very much like a maze: many paths, very few signposts, no clear choices, dead ends at every turn, and only one exit point. At a recent forum for language teachers, Freddie Tsokolibane presented the bewildering array of apparent options historically available to learners.

> At first I was at a high school where the teacher in a Standard Eight class told me I need to be very careful with how I speak this English, because the English we were doing at that school was English A. It was different from other Englishes because we were doing poetry and recitations and analysing poems. When we passed Standard Eight and went to matric, we were told the same story by the principal who would proudly speak English in a different way. He would tell us that the English at that school was English One. And we were going to be very careful because English One is unlike all other Englishes. When we passed matric and went to a training college, there we were told we were only fit to do what was called English Practical. Only after we had passed that would we be allowed to do English One. After English One there was a Special English that we did to get our teaching certificate. At the end of the day one is left with no option but to believe that the more you listen the more mystified you become.

Today is not the first attempt to bring language policy and assessment policy together, but it is a welcome opportunity to think again about how language assessment can contribute powerfully to transformation in education and in society generally. It needs also to be an opportunity to think about how it has contributed historically to repression, either actively or by default.

2 THE INHERITED FRAMEWORK

2.1 The principles underlying the current framework

The language assessment framework which we have inherited is based on a number of premises which were often not made explicit in policy prescriptions, some of which are briefly analysed below.

Learners who wish to reach a threshold of significance in society should become fluent in English.

'[It is] absolutely wrong and against American concepts to have a bilingual education program that is now openly, admittedly dedicated to preserving their native language and never getting them adequate in English so they can go out into the job market and participate,' said Ronald Reagan in 1981 (quoted in Baker, 1993:254). While not exactly a sound bite, this is a succinctly expressed prejudice. In South Africa, Afrikaans could be substituted for English in this exhortation to 'participate'. 'One nation, one language' is the explosive cover of a journal currently on American bookshelves. After a brief debate about the godlessness of bilingualism (see below), Afrikaans/English bilingualism did of course become a prized commodity. The hegemonic status of these languages, especially English, may persist in future no matter what shape the new assessment framework takes, and the proposal which we present in the second part of this paper may turn out to be little more than a pretty flower trampled in the wake of an Anglo-American Jagannath.

African languages are not suitable for modern life.

'Ndebele only goes up to Standard 5,' said a member of the audience at the ANC Arts and Culture Conference in 1993; 'How can it be used as a language of science and technology?' Our position is that one can in principle study nuclear physics in isiNdebele, provided that one is not fussy about the genesis of words. Would we really need to translate 'quark', for example? Is it worth a single cent of development funding? That a discourse of nuclear physics has not been established in isiNdebele is another matter, more to do with local customs (conceived in Pretoria) than with applied linguistics.

African languages should be used as vehicles of learning for the early years of education, but replaced at some stage by a real medium such as English.

African languages may then be strangled gradually, or suddenly, according to your research orientation. Thereafter, of course, they may be studied as objects of curiosity (rather like Latin, that other strangled tongue) right up to matriculation — as either first or third languages. What you study, of course, can take rather odd forms, in that the specimen under the grammarian's microscope may seem quite different from the organic varieties which are still very much alive in the real world. There are, of course, deep and damaging forms of discrimination at work here. One teacher at an Eltic workshop some years ago was filling in a language questionnaire, together with several other colleagues. When he came to the column for isiZulu, he responded 'quite well' on all counts (for example, reading and speaking). 'What are you doing?' asked a colleague, 'It's your home language!' His defence was that he only speaks 'Transvaal Zulu'.

South Africans live in monolingual or at best bilingual homes.

'It is definitely certain that godlessness is more prevalent among bilingual people than among those who are unilingual,' said Meyer in 1945 (quoted by de Klerk in Heugh *et al.*, forthcoming:53). Whether for the purposes of social engineering or in pursuit of ethnoreligious purity, bilinguals have come in for a hard time. With the exception of English/Afrikaans bilinguals, who receive a special mention in the Education Affairs Act (Act No. 70 of 1988), the regulatory framework in education assumes that learners are generally monolingual. However, in one typical former DET school, designated Northern Sotho medium in Gauteng, only 26 % of the learners speak Northern Sotho at home; all the learners speak more than one language.

South Africa only needs excellent translators and interpreters on a large scale in Afrikaans and English.

The South African government is beginning to translate its key documents into the new official languages. The translations of the interim constitution may just be ready in time for us to read it before the new constitution is approved. This is a minor issue compared to the tragedies that have unfolded in courts and hospitals because of poor or non-existent interpreting services. Structural discrimination will continue to exist as long as the education and training system to any extent ignores this need.

These are some of the foundations of an assessment framework and curriculum policy which has given rise to a wide range of discriminatory language requirements and discriminatory assessment instruments. A major feature of this framework is the distinction between first and second languages in various facets of the current language curriculum. The next section will deal with which of these distinctions are necessary, and which are both unnecessary and discriminatory.

2.2 The principles in practice

The distinction between first and second languages has come to have both descriptive and prescriptive connotations. It is useful to examine these separately before looking at the consequences of adopting the distinction for assessment purposes.

The descriptive use of the terms is both literal and analogous. In its literal meaning, a first language is acquired before a second. In its analogous meaning, a second-language learner is unlikely (the weak interpretation) to reach the level of competence of a first-language speaker, and (the strong interpretation) in fact incapable of reaching such a level. The arguments put forward to explain this alleged state of affairs range from the pedagogical to the ideological. At the methodological end of this continuum, the explanation relates to the acquisitional context of the learner, and the inability of schools and teachers to make up completely for the learner's lack of exposure to real-world use of the language in the early years of life. At the ideological end of the continuum, it is suggested that

language and culture are so inextricably bound together that the second-language learners lack of cultural penetration (into those spheres where the language/culture symbiosis plays itself out) places her at an insurmountable disadvantage in terms of language acquisition.

The prescriptive use of the terms first and second is a corollary of the descriptive. It is prescriptive because it suggests what must happen to 'remedy' what are perceived to be a range of problems associated with second-language learning. These prescriptions emerge across a wide range of language curriculum issues. Although they are interrelated, binary decision-making on each issue has led to a composite discriminatory system which not only tends to keep first- and second-language learners apart, but makes the latter's experience of the language curriculum generally inferior with regard to both process and outcomes. It will therefore be useful to unpack the prescriptions point by point.

Teachers must learn second-language methodology.

Becoming a language teacher in South Africa requires choosing among a number of qualitatively different experiences. Becoming an English teacher (of first-language learners) may involve serious attention as a student teacher to literature written in English, and to associated critical theories and texts. Becoming a teacher of Tshivenda may have required, as Doug Young points out (1995:64), studying that language entirely through the medium of English. Becoming a teacher of English as a second language may necessitate studying ESL as a component of a teacher training course, and at some point such a teacher is likely to encounter, directly or indirectly, the work of a non-governmental organisation offering a variety of progressive approaches to ESL methodology. All of these teachers are unlikely to have studied multilingual education. This wide variation in approaches to the training of language teachers, and the lack of cross-fertilisation among them, is unnecessary; the establishment and maintenance of wholly separate provision systems for such training is highly wasteful; the general absence of multilingual education in their curricula is a national disgrace.

Learners must learn in second-language classes, separate from first-language learners.

The argument in favour of separate classes for new-language learners deserves serious consideration. In the context of a multiracial school, Barkhuizen (1991) has argued that differences in syllabus specifications between first and second language may require different programmes of study, and that second-language teaching methodology is necessarily different in both aims and approach. In recognition of the socio-political need for integrated classes, given that the first/second-language divide is often along racial lines, he has more recently suggested a modular programme to facilitate syllabus integration (Barkhuizen, 1993).

The different syllabus argument is dealt with in more detail below, where we argue that learning outcomes should be common for all learners. The methodological argument is a more complex issue, and not strictly relevant to this discussion.

However, it seems likely that multiracial schools will increasingly be forced to adopt language teaching strategies which are designed for integrated classes. The use of peer models for language learning may be an inevitable — and welcome — outcome of this process.

Language learning materials should be specially designed for second-language learning situations.

Again, the issue of integrated schools suggests that language learning materials will increasingly have to be developed in such a way that they can be used fruitfully in classrooms with both home- and new-language learners. It should be noted, however, that apartheid has successfully ghettoised the majority of black working-class families, and that many black learners will continue to learn English as a new language at school. There will therefore, for some time to come, be a market for what we have come to know as second-language materials. The production of such materials is not inherently a pernicious phenomenon, provided that they are not second-rate in comparison with materials for home-language learners.

The nature of the programme of study should be qualitatively different from first-language programmes, in terms of aims and objectives as well as processes and resources. For example, a 'communicative syllabus' is preferable for second-language learners.

This is a central issue. We can see no justification for qualitative differences in the nature of the programme of study between learners of home languages and learners of new languages. Such differentiation is inevitably discriminatory and can be demeaning. For example, the JMB syllabus for English First Language prescribed the study of literature for aesthetic purposes; the JMB syllabus for English Second Language, on the other hand, suggested that literature should be used as a means to improve communicative competence. This policy differentiation arises out of the prejudices of syllabus planners, and is many steps removed from the real world of individual learners, whose wishes and talents are marginalised.

The differentiation also highlights a fundamental philosophical flaw in the 'communicative approach'. This approach arose out of a reaction against a purely linguistic approach to language teaching, which emphasised formal structures and language operations at the expense of social meaning and the negotiation of meaning among people. While the concern was valid, the approach subsequently developed, in its simplest and most widely disseminated form, placed excessive emphasis on simple, functional, observable speech acts. The complexity of the process of constructing meaning in various genres and contexts was largely buried. That such an approach should be institutionalised for second-language learners alone is unacceptable.

For assessment and gate-opening purposes, expectations of what learners can achieve (on a vertical ladder of outcomes or competencies) should be lower.

The regulatory mechanisms for varying the required attainment levels of language learners have two dimensions at present: the Higher/Standard Grade distinction and the First/Second Language distinction.

The distinction between Higher and Standard Grade is widely discredited among language teachers. It is reminiscent of the misguided thinking behind a course entitled 'Mathematics for Early School Leavers' which was developed in Britain for eleven-year-olds, on the assumption that these eleven-year-olds would leave school without formal certification at the age of sixteen. Any mechanism for institutionalising different expectations for different categories of learners tends to have the obvious effect of ensuring that the expectations are met and not surpassed. That a formula exists for translating marks obtained at the Standard Grade into marks obtained at the Higher Grade illustrates adequately that the distinction is in any case unnecessary.

The distinction between what is required of first and second-language learners is more complex. Ideally, a single candidate should, in a multilingual education system, demonstrate similar capabilities in at least two languages at any given exit point, and within reasonable parameters there should be no distinction in terms of required outcomes. This is not a problem for the vast majority of South Africans. Problems arise on a fairly large scale when the system begins to stipulate — by regulation or by suasion — which languages these should be.

For example, let us assume that any two official languages can be offered at GCE, but that the learning outcome requirements for a pass are the same. It is useful to think through the consequences in crude demographic terms, while remembering that there would be many exceptions. Most black South African learners would pass comfortably in two African languages, provided that the schools are able to offer adequate provision in order to develop those competences which are fairly school-specific. Many white South African learners would pass comfortably in English and Afrikaans, again with the above proviso. A fairly small number of learners would need quite special provision, however, to reach the same attainment levels in two languages, simply because their out-of-school acquisitional context is largely limited to one language. Another category of learners, including immigrants, returning exiles and speakers of non-official South African languages, might be able to offer one official language plus one other.The current reality, of course, is rather different. The widely shared perception of English as an attractive commodity practically ensures that one of the two languages chosen would be English, even if this is not prescribed. The tables are suddenly turned in the demographic analysis, not of course completely, but enough to make the two-language requirement more of a problem for a greater number of South African learners.

This predicament — self-enforced repression, one might call it, in a scenario of free choice of languages — leads us straight back to the differentiated requirements policy: at GEC we must allow for the different acquisitional contexts of the candidates, by requiring less advanced learning outcomes in one of the two languages. One might argue that this should be the case irrespective of how many learners are implicated in the predicament. Our proposal below suggests a way out of the impasse.

It is possible to apply an assessment framework which is conceptually engineered for monolinguals to bilingual or multilingual learners.

The current language assessment paradigm essentially ignores the existence of multilingual individuals in ways which are more or less obvious. Firstly, the framework offers no recognition for translation or interpreting skills across languages. Given the explosion of need for such skills in South Africa, this needs to be urgently addressed. Secondly, the assessment instruments offer no sense of the multilingual individual, except as a kind of composite of monolingual individuals. No picture is given of the domains and contexts in which the individual operates in different languages, nor of how effectively she manages these different scenarios. It is reasonably rare to find a multilingual who regularly argues her way through legal issues in the same way in five languages. The same person might, however, read legal text in two languages, and mediate the text verbally to others in a further three. A refined assessment instrument should, in a multilingual society, be able to ascertain and validate the whole profile of a multilingual individual; and we should note that the domain limitations may be more to do with sociopolitical constraints than with linguistic capacity.

Language learning outcomes can be specified on a vertical scale from easy to difficult and from simple to complex.

The belief that language learning outcomes can be neatly pinned onto a language learning ladder is wishful thinking. It has underpinned a great many second-language syllabi and learning materials in the past, in which the general assumption was that the additional language was being learned rather than acquired, therefore it was possible to plan which structure, which function, which notion or even which word should be learned next. The belief that this was possible caused untold grief among second-language teachers the world over, though this did not seem to prevent publishers from producing material based on it, or policymakers from generating pertinent syllabi.

The belief arises of course in our new context as well, as we strive towards an equitable qualification framework. We have palliated the problem with a new definition of learning outcomes, which do not at all resemble the detailed language-specific items which characterised syllabi in the past. But we need to be wary of the extent to which outcome prescriptions do not match real-world language development in individual learners, and thus impede the formal

recognition of achievement. At a simple level, this can be illustrated with reference to the four traditional language skills: it is highly unlikely that any learner's language development will proceed evenly in all four skills. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), in conjunction with the National Languages Institute of Australia (NLIA), has recently developed an achievement-based approach to language certification which assesses candidates in terms of receptive skills only. Such schemes open up greater possibilities for recognition of learning achievements.

A target language only approach is methodologically appropriate, to compensate for a deprived acquisitional context beyond the classroom.

Mascher (1995) has performed a ferocious analysis of the origins and iniquities of the proposition that only the target language should be used in the language classroom. He suggests that the proposition originates in 'colonizer monolinguals ... who have not even managed to learn the language of the children they teach' (1995:8), and is driven by the interest of publishers in producing for a global market. It is relevant to today's discussion, in that it raises the issue of non-target-language assessment techniques. This might take various forms, as we discuss in our proposal below. For the time being, we would like to leave the analysis to Gina Valdes, and enjoy some 'English con salsa':

> Welcome to ESL 100, English Surely Latinized,
> ingles con chile y cilantro, English as American
> as Benito Juarez. Welcome, muchachos from Xochicalco,
> learn the language of dolares and dolores, of kings
> and queens, of Donald Duck and Batman. Holy Toluca!
> In four months youll be speaking like George Washington,
> in four weeks you can ask, More coffee? In two months
> you can say, May I take your order? In one year you
> can ask for a raise, cool as the Tuxpan River.
>
> Welcome, muchachas from Teocaltiche, in this class
> we speak English refrito, English con sal y limon,
> English thick as mango juice, English poured from
> a clay jug, English tuned like a requinto from Uruapan,
> English lighted by Oaxacan dawns, English spiked
> with mezcal from Juchitan, English with a red cactus
> flower blooming in its heart.
>
> Welcome, welcome, amigos del sur, bring your Zapotec
> tongues, your Nahuatl tones, your patience of pyramids,
> your red suns and golden moons, your guardian angels,
> your duendes, your patron saints, Santa Tristeza,
> Santa Alegria, Santo Todolopuede. We will sprinkle
> holy water on pronouns, make the sign of the cross
> on past participles, jump like fish from Lake Patzcuaro
> on gerunds, pour tequila from Jalisco on future perfects,

say shoes and shit, grab a cool verb and a pollo loco
and dance on the walls like chapulines.

When a teacher from La Jolla or a cowboy from Santee
asks you, Do you speak English? You'll answer, Si,
yes, simon, of course. I love English!

And you'll hum
a Mixtec chant that touches la tierra and the heavens.

3 A NEW LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

3.1 Premises

We will begin this section by presenting a number of premises on which a new language assessment framework could be based, if we are to eliminate the discrimination and incoherence which characterises the current system.

> Assessment practices should underpin curriculum development aimed at the integration of education and training. (IEB, 1995)
>
> The purpose, techniques and methods of assessment should reflect a core of knowledge, skills, understanding and abilities which straddle the developmental needs of education in the formal, adult and training worlds. (IEB, 1995)
>
> The application of assessment should support not only the critical growth of human resources required by the new South Africa, but also underpin the developmental and redistributive intentions of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. (IEB, 1995)
>
> Assessment practices should ... fit the educational requirements of age, location and delivery system. (IEB, 1995)
>
> Assessment practices must be constructed in a new order in such a way that they
>
> - promote the mobility of learners across sectors (formal, adult, training);
> - open access to the next stages of education, training and jobs; ...
> - give recognition to learning achievement whether the learning was acquired in institutions or through life experience; ...
> - lead to valid, portable and cumulative qualifications and credits; ...
> - promote mobility and portability by encouraging access and recognising success achievement rather than 'selecting out' and focusing on failure. (IEB, 1995)
>
> New assessment practices should 'move away from being punitive, humiliating and fear-inducing. Assessment should never be used as a form

of negative discipline or punishment, but should always guide and support learning. In South Africa it is especially important to recast assessment practices so that they are sensitive to the possibility of favouring or disadvantaging on irrelevant grounds such as race, culture, gender, socio-economic status and language'. (IEB, 1995)

The framework should recognise prior learning, which 'opens access to those who have been inhibited by institutional or structural impediments from demonstrating their acquired experience, knowledge and skills in the formal system'. (IEB, 1995)

Assessment centres should be available to learners to facilitate access, and 'continuous observation ... can provide real diagnostic information in both the school and training environment'. (IEB, 1995)

The ethos and application framework sketched above applies equally to the various worlds in which teaching and learning take place. (IEB, 1995)

We would like to add the following:

- The framework should affirm languages that were previously disadvantaged and demonstrate that any language can be used in a variety of domains and contexts. This could, possibly, lead to the development of African languages for use in domains and contexts in which these languages were deemed not suitable.
- It should demonstrate that linguistic and conceptual development follows the same paths in all languages.
- Finally, it should affirm multilingualism as a social and economic resource, and as a norm rather than an exception in our society.

3.2 The basic design

Our proposed framework has the following basic features:

- It would assess the same outcomes across all languages at any given level.
- The number of levels for such a framework could be twelve for all languages — official, non-official and foreign. Language Level 6 (LL6) could be approximately equivalent to GEC. From LL1 to LL6 the outcomes for children and adults would take into account the different developmental needs of children and adults. LL9 could be equivalent to the Further Education Certificate. LL12 would require full 'occupational competence', e.g. for public service or professional requirements.
- Learners could be assessed in two ways. Learners could decide on the basis of the outcomes specified which level they wish to be assessed for.

Alternatively, an assessment instrument would be administered which would assign a particular level to the learner.

- The framework would enable learners language competences to be assessed separately. A learner could for example be assessed in one or two skills at a particular level, e.g. listening and reading skills, and be assessed in others at a later stage.

- The same assessment instruments would be used across all languages. While texts for reading comprehension should ideally be original, and therefore different across languages, the activities should be of the same nature and the learning outcomes identical.

- Bilingual and multilingual competency could be assessed, by linking two or more cells in the grid for testing and certification purposes. The certificate issued would give a profile of the bilingual or multilingual individual. At higher levels in the framework, this could be developed into a certification system for translating and interpreting.

- This framework would be independent of the main certification framework though not in disjuncture with language requirements for formal certification points. The language requirements for formal certification may be managed by regulation over time. For example, to obtain a Level 4 (ABET) or GEC, the requirements in the immediate future may be two languages, one at LL6 and one at LL4. Alternatively, a candidate may need two languages at LL6, but reading or writing skills only in one of these. As circumstances change, for example the quality of resource provision, the requirements may be altered.

- The framework would also provide an opportunity for descriptive assessment. The descriptive assessment would be twofold. Learners would receive a descriptive assessment of their competency in each language separately, and a descriptive assessment of their combined competency in all the languages they have learnt. The descriptive assessment would include what the learners competencies are in different domains.

- Learners do not have to be assessed *en masse* in single sittings. A learner may choose to be assessed whenever she feels ready, or at fixed but frequent times throughout the year.

4 ISSUES

The proposed framework, we argue, is a powerful solution — in parts — to the current problems. Below we begin to address some of the issues it raises.

4.1 Common learning outcomes across languages

We feel that it is vital to establish common learning outcomes across all the languages in the framework. The sample learning outcomes which are being piloted by the IEB are, we think, indisputably applicable across languages. For instance, the IEBs reading outcome ABET Level 3 in Language Communication ('[T]he candidate should be able to recognise purpose, audience and source of text'), can be a reading outcome for this same level in any language. Having common outcomes across languages may also make it apparent that African languages can be used in domains and contexts denied them previously.

4.2 First/second-language outcomes

The distinction between first and second-language outcomes falls away entirely in the framework. We have become accustomed to a discourse of second-language outcomes in the communicative paradigm and others. Language classes would probably be a better place without exhortations to deal with 'polite forms of greetings [and] social conversations', or with 'contrasts between words like *pull* and *pool*' (DET Standard 1 English Syllabus). And the closer one gets to useful learning outcomes, the less they appear to be restricted to new-language learners — see the IEB example quoted above.

4.3 Integration of education and training

The framework can apply in any context. It can be used in formal schooling, in the workplace, and in ABET centres.

4.4 Age and access

School-based learners and adults can access the system at any level and at any time in their learning careers. For example, a Standard 9 student might fulfil all language requirements for matriculation eighteen months before completing Standard 10. An adult learner may complete the language requirements for ABET Level 4 while still studying Maths at Level 1. The framework facilitates open learning by not locking learners into promotion systems.

Also, the framework caters for the recognition of discrete competences, and thus enables a learner who can, for example, read a text in a given language without being able to speak it.

4.5 Child/adult differentiation

The framework will need to differentiate between adults and children to respect differences in life experience, and to promote appropriate developmental learning. For example, research shows (Donaldson 1986) tentatively that the development of the notion of causality in children aged five both influences the acquisition of

appropriate linguistic structures and is influenced by them. Another dimension of this issue is that the framework may allow for non-linguistic responses at certain levels, or even for responses in other languages.

4.6 Language learning in schools

The framework effectively abolishes separate first and second-language curricula. In a given classroom there may be learners who are ready to be tested at different levels. Alternatively, it may be possible for schools to experiment with learners of different ages studying together for the same level or band of levels.

4.7 Language levels and certification

The separation of regulatory action on language requirements from the language assessment framework itself allows for developmental work to begin on the framework.

4.8 Languages of teaching and learning

The framework does not address the crucial issue of choice of languages of learning. Nor does it address the pressure of the demand for English. It affirms African languages and gives recognition to the fact that they can be used as vehicles for learning. It does not necessarily encourage, however, the choice of African languages as languages of learning and teaching. These limitations are due to the political and economic status that English is still seen to have. On the other hand the framework may encourage the critical challenging of the dominance of English in the political and economic sphere.

4.9 Familiarity and feasibility

Given the hugely disparate traditions of language teaching in South Africa, the framework would have to run in parallel to the current system for some years. However, there may be scope for short-term enrichment of assessment practices of the current formal system.

4.10 Curriculum resources

The framework suggests that a common approach to teacher education in the language field is possible and necessary. It may also encourage and facilitate the development of progressive methodologies and materials for African languages.

5 CONCLUSION

The proposed framework, we have already suggested, may be just a pretty flower. Like the nasturtium, we think it is quite a tough one. We hope it does not wilt under your interrogation.

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THE ASSESSMENT OF LANGUAGE OUTCOMES IN ABET: IMPLICATIONS OF AN APPROACH

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1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THIS PAPER

Since 1993 the IEB has been involved in a participatory process of constructing an assessment model for different stages of adult basic education. The overall aim of this work has been to start the process of setting certificated benchmarks in order to establish learning pathways for adult learners.

This presentation is in the form of a case study. It aims to highlight some of the issues around language assessment which we have been grappling with over the last year, and to put them in the context of the theme of this conference. We call it a 'presentation' rather than a paper as it is part of a series of evolutionary discussion papers and consultations that we have been having with a range of people involved in and affected by the IEBs work. It was when we reached the point of drawing together the emerging debates that we began to realise that our concerns, mostly focused on the ABE (Adult Basic Education) field, needed to interact more explicitly with broader policy debates. This realisation was in fact the genesis of this conference: it seemed to us that there were two areas in education and training in which policy debate and implementation plans were going ahead without sufficient reference to each other. These two areas are the thinking around the principles and structuring of the National Qualifications Framework, and the debates on language policy in education.

Two guiding principles of the National Qualifications Framework are those of the *integration* of education and training, and *mobility* for learners who have not been able to go through conventional education or training routes. Those who work in ABET have long recognised the lack of these two principles in our systems of delivery and accreditation as a barrier to progress in the field. In the language policy debates the major issues have been the *role of language in learning*, especially in relation to past medium of instruction policies, and the role of *African languages* in education, especially in relation to new constitutional principles regarding language. For ABE, issues around acquisition of literacy in first or second language, and the relation of language skills to progress into further study or training, have

also been of prime importance. The NQF offers us an opportunity to restructure our ways of thinking about these issues.

For this conference we tried to look at ways of locating our work in relation to both the NQF and language policy debates. The NQF lens led us to reflect on what we have learned from a preliminary engagement in a standard setting process; language policy concerns led us to look at some of the assumptions inherent in our model.

The IEBs work is situated in the context of the needs of adult learners without formal schooling for a clear framework within which to progress in terms of study or training. The IEB model was implemented on a pilot basis at Level 3 (the equivalent for adults at the end of seven years of primary schooling) in the subject areas of Communications in English and Mathematics in August 1994. The pilot aimed to develop standards in the form of *outcomes* as goals for learning: these outcomes would be generated through wide consultation and would encapsulate common agreement on desirable and useful learning goals at a particular level. Towards the end of 1994 the second phase of the IEBs work began with the process of consultation on language and numeracy outcomes for ABET Levels 1 and 2 (rough equivalence for adults of years three and five of formal schooling).

While the 1994 pilot focused on the assessment of language in terms of English only, as this was where the highest demand was located, the Levels 1 and 2 language pilot has extended the development process to focus on all South African languages. Work at Levels 1 and 2 led us to propose an assessment model for language in which there would be no distinction between first and second/ additional language for the purposes of assessment. This model has become known as the *Common Outcomes* model. This presentation and other related IEB documents are intended to serve as a draft menu for possible research and evaluation questions.

While the IEB has made certain decisions in order to be able to go ahead within an experimental framework for running Levels 1 and 2 language examinations in November 1995 (see conclusion), our long-term position on the models is still to be informed by national developments in terms of language policy, a national qualifications framework and standard setting. In addition, the IEB will engage in further consultation and developmental work around assessment tasks and methods, performance outcomes and assessment criteria at Levels 1 and 2 during the pilot phase. Feedback from users taking part in the pilot will be an essential aspect of the evaluation process, and will be built into further developments beyond the 1995 pilot phase.

This paper reproduces key parts of a fuller discussion paper, and includes further additions prepared for the HSRC/IEB conference. The fuller discussion paper charts the different stages of development during the IEBs consultation processes for Levels 1 and 2. It is entitled *In search of a model for the assessment of language*

outcomes in ABET. It is available from the IEB, and was published in the SAALA 1995 Proceedings.

2 DEVELOPING OUTCOMES FOR THE NQF: SOME COMMENTS ON THE PROCESS

The IEB has been working in the framework of emerging proposals for a national qualifications framework. The NQF is ultimately a structure for recognising learner achievement in terms of standards. Standards are defined as follows:

> A national standard is defined as a registered statement of desired education and training outcomes and their associated assessment criteria.[1]

It is also noted in the Interim Guidelines document that:

> Standards are socially constructed and should thus be developed and set by those who have a specific interest in particular learning outcomes at particular levels in a transparent, participatory and democratic manner.[2]

These features of the NQF had two major implications for our work: first, we began exploring how to formulate an assessment model in terms of *outcomes*; and second, the *processes* through which we would reach these outcomes would have to be as inclusive and consultative as possible. The first point is discussed under Section 3. Some brief comments on the second aspect of our work follow.

How standards will be set and who will set them for the NQF is still a matter of some debate. There are proposals in various education and training sectors on issues such as principles for standards-setting bodies, composition of standards-setting bodies, and guidelines for writing standards. While the IEBs ABET language and numeracy outcomes from Levels 1 — 3 have been accepted by the Adult Directorate of the Ministry as *interim* guidelines, they will obviously have to go through processes of endorsement or adaptation by such bodies when they are in place. What has happened, though, is that we have begun to explore what a standards-setting process might look like through the way in which our outcomes have been developed. This process has been illuminating in ways that are relevant to the theme of this conference, and three aspects of the process are noted.

2.1 Talking across sectors

Our consultations were mainly within the ABET field. One of the key areas still to be resolved, however, is whether there will be a separate standards body for ABET, or whether standards will be established according to broad pathways of

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1 A National ABET Framework. Interim Guidelines Discussion Document. August 1995. Department of Education - Directorate of ABET, page 6.

2 *Ibid.*, page 6.

learning which will cover all levels including the formal schooling system. If it is the latter, it may well be that some of our language outcomes are too 'adult focused' to apply equally well to school learning, especially at the lower levels. Do we then have different standards for schools and for ABET? What are the implications of this for the principles of integration, equivalence and progress? Do we need to formulate subsets of outcomes for different sectors? These questions are not insoluble, but they do illustrate that the NQF will have to be implemented in such a way that it enables articulation across sectors while at the same time making allowance for the contextual needs of different sectors. In our work on language outcomes at Levels 1, 2 and 3 we are grappling with the pathway issue in two ways: first, that ABET outcomes must link into any formal requirements or standards that are put in place for the GEC at ABET Level 4; second, that ABET outcomes must also support adult needs in terms of language use, whether these be related to functional life skills or language skills for training pathways. The need for cross-sectoral debate is clear.

2.2 Standard setting is both a political and a technical process

Setting standards is not a value-free process. This is especially true in the field of language, whether one is talking about what people want and need in one of the economically or politically powerful languages, or whether one is talking about social or pedagogical values and uses in other languages. Developing standards for the NQF has to be a collective cultural action rather than a technology that can be imposed as a ready-made system. The term 'growing standards' is perhaps more appropriate than 'setting' standards, as this captures the notion of a changing environment, full of forces and pressures, which is part of the evolutionary nature of educational change. Standards have to be grown in the context of language use. While there are technical stages in the process when curriculum or assessment specialists design procedures for teaching and learning, these models do not exist as abstractions; they should emerge from participatory input, and they will be adapted in evaluation and practice, and in response to changing values, goals and needs. In short, if standards are to have a genuine life, standard setting has to involve practitioners and stakeholders from all areas as well as specialists.

2.3 The paradigm shift

As we noted earlier, the NQF offers a different way of looking at learner progress. Much of our educational thinking in this country, including work done in ABE, has been defined by a rigid school system culminating in a composite matric certificate bound by complex requirements — numbers and combinations of subjects, time frames, etc. In our work at Levels 1, 2 and 3 we have found that people need a lot more information and debate on some of the *systemic* shifts implied by the NQF. Some major areas are noted:

- outcomes do not require a uniform curriculum (see Section 3 for debates on this issue);
- in order to get credit for standards, all learners do not have to go through a single specified learning time frame;
- assessment opportunities should be frequent so that learners can accumulate credits within different time frames;
- because the NQF is based on a system of flexible credit accumulation, a learner *does not have to be on the same level in all subjects at the same time*; for example, a learner could be working towards credits for Sesotho Level 3, for English Level 1 and Numeracy Level 1 (see Section 6). It is only if a composite certificate is instituted at GEC and FEC levels that learners will probably have to have a number of required credits at the same level.

There are of course a number of debates around all these areas. What is apparent though is that these systemic shifts have huge implications both for delivery agencies and for learners themselves, in terms of the way institutional progress is structured and educational choices are made. This means that if the NQF is to fulfil its stated aims, there must be public and accessible information and counselling services, so that people can make the richer and more useful learning choices that the NQF potentially offers.

3 CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT IN AN OUTCOMES-BASED FRAMEWORK

The IEB's Level 3 project and the Levels 1 and 2 pilot are assessment-led and outcomes-based. At the outset of our developmental work we made a distinction between an 'assessment model' and 'curriculum'. Our original aim was to design an assessment model rather than undertake curriculum development.

Outcomes are a result of learning and involve demonstrations of performance; that is, the emphasis is on what people can do when they reach an exit or certification point in a system, rather than on a list of topics covered in a course. We believe that 'what people can do' involves a lot more than 'knowing about' certain subject areas; it involves being able to demonstrate various conceptual and process skills as well (that is, the generic competencies or abilities that have been at the centre of much curriculum debate recently). This approach in turn demands a range of assessment forms and practices beyond conventional paper and pencil tests.

An extract from a paper given at the 1994 SAALA conference highlights what we mean by this:

> ... outcomes ... focus on what people can do as a result of an educational programme, but they should be seen as broad, integrative capabilities which include not only skills but cultural understandings, attitudes, interest and

process skills relating to learning to learn, accessing and using information and so on. Outcomes should therefore decidedly be seen as incorporating process, and are by no means synonymous with product. Because of this the movement to Outcomes Based Education & Training demands rich forms of assessment — preferably of real performance — rather than achievement testing. Outcomes statements are central to the construction of standards. Standards allow for transparency about what learners in a system are expected to be able to do, at what level of quality (detail, speed, finesse, exactness, etc.) they should be able to do these things, and how they are to be assessed.[3]

One of the IEB's aims in using an outcomes approach was to develop a flexible assessment framework that could accommodate the varied strands in ABE. Given the different contexts and needs in ABE, and the number of different programmes and curricula that have been developed to meet these needs, we envisaged national standards in a field as the specification of skills and competencies at particular levels — without detailed prescription of curriculum. Curriculum development involves sets of issues ranging from epistemological, ideological and didactic positions to technical aspects such as materials and delivery. While assessment is one facet of curriculum in this broad sense, an assessment model focuses explicitly on statements of outcomes, assessment methods and criteria for grading of performance. How these outcomes are reached — teaching methods, topics through which skills will be developed, programme materials and so on — is theoretically outside the range of an assessment model. The IEB has not therefore developed a curriculum in terms of specifying a programme of learning covering set contents and topics within a time-bound framework, linked to specific learning materials. The assessment tasks themselves are aimed at tapping generalisable skills rather than programme-specific content.

While the IEB assessment model does not specify curriculum elements, however, it would be spurious to deny that assessment is closely linked to curriculum. The 'backwash' effect of examinations on teaching and learning is well known: quite simply, if a test focuses on recall of factual knowledge, teachers will teach factual knowledge: if a test focuses on reasoning, analysis and problem solving, these activities are more likely to be built into teaching. Indeed, one of the fundamental values of the IEB is to use assessment in order to promote good quality education, to use 'the backwash effect' of assessment so that abilities such as critical thinking are valued more than memorisation of facts, for example.

In essence then, the IEB is laying the foundations for a culture of standards setting in ABET, by defining the desired outcomes and methods of assessment at the end of a stage of learning. These outcomes are evolving through consultation and

3 French & King, "Constructing an Assessment Package for Communications in English at ABE Level 3". Paper presented at SAALA Conference 1994.

collation of best practice, informed by a notion of key competencies on which there is increasing agreement in the field.

Where the debate becomes more complex is in the area of teaching methodology. During the Level 3 pilot, concerns were expressed that the IEB's assessment model functioned as a curriculum in that the outcomes and the assessment methods imposed a particular teaching approach. However, the notion that assessment alone will determine the teaching approach ignores the fact that our users are working with a variety of learning programmes as well as with the IEB assessment model, and that the IEB's assessment model has been formulated in close consultation with professionals representing all the programmes in the field. A positive backwash effect of the IEBs work would be more integration of a variety of assessment techniques within ongoing teaching activities. (The Level 3 internal assessment component was in fact specifically developed in order to allow users to utilise whatever contexts, topics and materials are most relevant to their learners.) We are committed to the notion that setting out desirable outcomes and ways of assessing these will have a positive impact on teaching practice, and we believe that the focus on the development of critical and cognitive skills that can be applied and transferred to other contexts will trigger a move towards active and integrated task-based learning. This does not mean the narrow prescription of one teaching approach to the exclusion of other methods, but rather the adaptation and integration of the Level 3 assessment orientation and examples into existing programmes. Many programmes are based on similar principles in any case. The outcomes and assessment approaches are ultimately aimed at providing a shared vocabulary of teaching and learning goals which can give coherence to a fragmented field, and contribute to the ongoing process of standard setting.

	Common Outcomes Model (* = assessment)
Level 3	* * * * * * * * *
Level 2	* * * * * * * * *
Level 1	* * * * * * * * *
	Eng Afrik isiZu isiNd Ts Vn Sepd Setsw etc (all 11 SA Languages)

4 THE COMMON OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT MODEL

The model for the 1995 Levels 1 and 2 pilot proposes that there should be no distinction between first and second/additional language for the purposes of assessment. It can be represented as follows:

It is based on the premise that within an outcomes-based framework it is detrimental to the status of both first and second/additional languages to make a distinction between first language assessment and second language assessment. First languages suffer because they are not accorded a comparable certification status to second languages, and second languages suffer because the outcomes tested are comparable to outcomes at lower levels in first language, and therefore may be seen as 'lower grade'.

According to the Common Outcomes proposal, all languages should be assessed equally: assessment should be offered in all languages at all levels, and the outcomes assessed in English as an additional language at Level 1, for example, should be the same outcomes assessed in so-called 'mother tongue' at Level 1. It should be stressed here that this is not a model for *teaching or learning* languages, but for *assessing the outcomes* of learning.

In order to develop such a system of assessment, one would start by listing all the definable language competencies that literate mother tongue speakers have in a language — in the areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The next step would be to order these competencies, in each of the four domains, from elementary to complex. Finally, one would decide on cut-off points, or benchmarks, in terms of levels.

The implications of this are that the level of competencies proposed in earlier IEB workshops for 'mother tongue' Level 1 would have to be significantly lowered, and several of the originally proposed competencies would go into Levels 2 and 3. Learners would then obtain higher level certificates in the first language for demonstrating the competencies that had originally been placed at Level 1. According to this argument, the proposed new model promoted African languages more effectively than previous models. Some people were uneasy at the invocation of the 'political symbolism of the language policy debates'[4] in support of an untried model: if the primary rationale for the Common Outcomes model is that it should promote languages that are at present disadvantaged by according them equal treatment in assessment, one must be sure that this is indeed the consequence of such a model. This is of course one of the central issues at the heart of the models debate.

5 HOW DOES THE MODEL RELATE TO NATIONAL POLICY PROPOSALS?

National debates around language education policy seem to support the proposed new model, as the following quotes show:

4 Submission from Zannie Bock & Daryl McLean, USWE.

> In South Africa, many people refer to 'first' and 'second' languages when discussing the status of different languages and the assumed competence of their speakers. The term 'second language speaker', as used in South Africa, implies a deficit view of language competence. If the term is used in the correct pedagogical sense, it should suggest curriculum strategies to meet the needs of the learners and the dictates of the learning context, and not refer to the level of competence of the speaker. The aim of a fully bilingual education system is to achieve a single level of language proficiency by the end of compulsory schooling.[5]
>
> Since the aim of the language curriculum is to develop full competence in at least two languages, there should be no distinction between first and second language learners in terms of curricular aims of targets. False ceilings in terms of target competence should be removed.[6]
>
> Mechanisms will be established to ensure the articulation and equivalence of the curriculum between different learning contexts. Curriculum articulation and equivalence will not necessarily mean that the content of the curriculum, the time frame or the teaching methods used will be the same across different learning contexts.[7]

It must be noted, however, that these proposals and their practical implementations are still being debated in the formal school sector, the training sector and in consultations on the structuring of the NQF.

6 A VARIETY OF LEARNING ROUTES?

In theory, one advantage of the proposed new model is that it allows for a variety of learning routes. Institutions can enter their learners for Level 1 assessment in the appropriate mother tongue in the first year (or block of tuition), and perhaps also Numeracy Level 1. As soon as learners are ready, they can enter for the First Language Level 2 assessment. Most institutions would probably recommend that learners enter Level 1 in an additional language after having passed at least Levels 1 and 2 in their mother tongue — although this would not necessarily be an IEB requirement. The IEB's policy of flexible entry points means that if institutions/learners want to, they can do mother tongue at Level 3 simultaneously with English as an additional language Level 1, and numeracy at any other level on the continuum.

IEB has a policy of offering ABET exams at all levels several times during the year, which means that learners can do a First Language Level 1 assessment after only

5 *Language Policy in Education: Report of the Language Policy Working Group*, CEPD, June 1993, Part 2, page 12.

6 *Curriculum Frameworks for the General Phase of Education*, compiled by Adele Gordon, CEPD, January 1995, page 69.

7 *ANC Discussion Document: A Policy Framework for Education & Training*, January 1996, page 19.

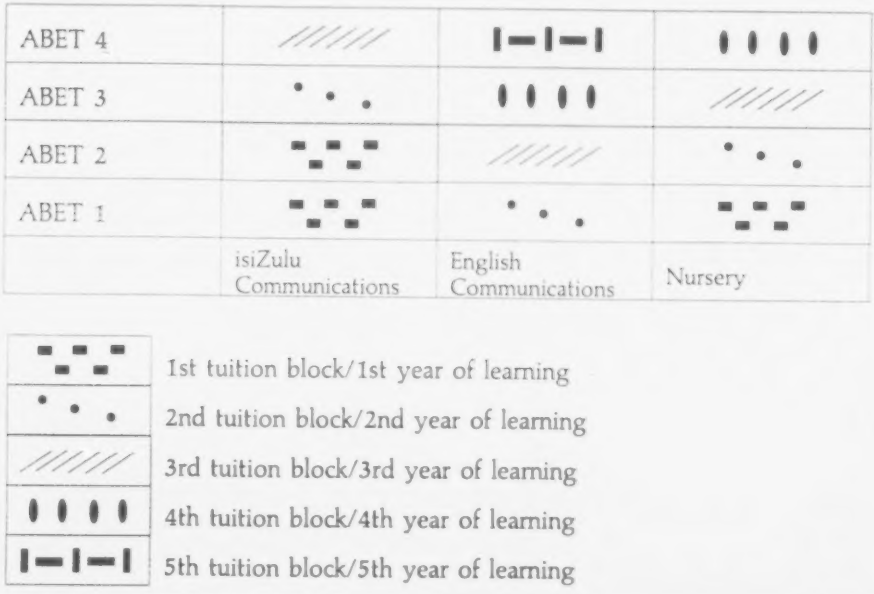
six months (or, say, 150 hours) of tuition in their mother tongue, if they are ready for it, and go on to do a First Language Level 2 certificate in the following six months or 150 hours. Learners studying a second language, on the other hand, are likely to require much longer periods of tuition before being entered for assessment.

In this model, the IEB can offer assessment in all languages, allowing providers to advise their learners (or even require them) to be assessed in certain languages at certain levels. Learners can be assessed in as many languages as they want to, or only one; learners can enter assessments in different languages at different levels in the same year; and there need not be a compulsory requirement of either English/ Afrikaans or mother tongue assessment. An example of a possible route through the ABET system for an individual learner is given as Figure 1 on the page below.

However, it must be noted that the apparent freedom of choice which the Common Outcomes model offers may not be feasible in reality, as learners will often be expected to have developed certain skills or gained certain knowledge in one subject before starting a course in another. The strong relationship between subjects at different levels, and the fact that conceptual development in relation to

Figure 1
Accumulating cedits for adult learning:
The IEB's Pilot Assessment Model

An example of one possible route through the ABET assessment system for an individual learner. In this example, the learners mother tongue is isiZulu and English is an additional language. Sustainable literacy is reached at the end of Level 2.



content is integrated with language ability means that the qualifications framework will need to specify so-called 'rules of combination', which ensure that learners follow a logical progression through the system.

There is a further complication in the debate on learning routes which can only be noted here. This is the question of how to ensure equivalence between ABET and the formal education sector, so that ABET learners can ultimately join 'mainstream' education. One of the hard-won principles of ABET curriculum design is that learning should be contextualised in the needs and realities of adult learners. This principle has been built into the formulation of many of the IEB's language outcomes. Some of the outcomes are closely tied to familiarity with adult concerns, and assume an adult cognitive level. How would these compare to language outcomes set at equivalent levels in the formal school sector? The issue is mainly relevant at basic education levels. One option might be the development of a generic set of language outcomes at basic levels for all learners, while a subset of outcomes linked to adult-oriented language use is developed for ABET. This issue will be explored further in the ongoing consultation process.

7 COLLAPSING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

The Common Outcomes model accepts that for the purposes of teaching and learning there are very real distinctions between first and second language acquisition, and the development of literacy skills in either context. It is not advocating a common learning programme or teaching methodology for first and second language and literacy learners. What it does say is that the same outcomes can be reached in a learner's first or second language (albeit at different rates of progress).

The proponents of this model argue that although learners may have different levels of competence in different languages, and will progress at different rates according to whether the language they are learning is their first or an additional language, it is possible (and desirable) to describe learners' competence in the same terms for first and second languages. Assessment of a learner's competence at a particular level can be based on common outcomes.

Concerns expressed in reaction to this view relate to the formulation of the outcomes: will they be based on a first language or second language paradigm? A quote from a submission to the IEB illustrates this concern:

> In terms of learning a language besides one's first (main) language, it is generally acknowledged that to acquire a first-language-like proficiency is the exception rather than the rule ... The question is then, would it be right and/or appropriate to expect L1-like performances from learners? Would it

be fair, in other words, to set outcomes for all languages which would presuppose a proficiency akin to that of a mother-tongue speaker? Conversely, what would happen if *all language-learning outcomes* were set in recognition of the fact that non-L1 speakers are unlikely to achieve a mother-tongue-like proficiency in the language? Where would the space be for recognition of very real L1 skills which people do have in their own L1?[8]

There is another related issue at stake here, linked to the view that different languages have different social uses and meanings as well as different contexts and domains. This is especially true in our country, given the history and contexts of language power relations. In a recent article in *Bua!* Mulhausler argues that

> ... most perceptions of the world and parts of the world are brought into being and sustained by languages. Speakers of different languages, therefore, do not perceive the same world. Instead, different languages emphasise and filter various aspects of a multi-faceted reality in a vast number of ways.....These include differences in vocabulary, differences in the grammatical information that is expressed, and differences in the boundary between what is regarded as literal truth and what is regarded as metaphorical.[9]

This would suggest that care must be taken to avoid formulating outcomes that favour the perceptual lens of one language over another.

The question is, then, can language outcomes be formulated in such a way that they do not restrict the skills and competencies that they aim to assess in different languages? This restriction can happen through various permutations: either through modelling the outcomes on first or second language abilities, or through modelling them in terms of existing outcomes either for English with little recognition for abilities prized in African languages contexts, or for African languages without taking into account users' English language needs.

In the history of language assessment in South Africa the first/second language distinction and the focus on different roles for different languages have actually led to a restrictive categorisation of language use. At its most extreme, these distinctions can lead to the kinds of assessment where English second language assessments take the form of filling in forms and writing formal letters, and first language assessments focus on the use of language in personal and social contexts. First and second language are set up as oppositions, often in terms of second language (in the form of English) usage being linked to 'modernisation' while first language (in the form of African languages) is used for the preservation of

8 Submission from Elizabeth Burroughs.

9 *Bua!*, Vol 9, No 4, May 1995, page 5.

10 This is not only an African phenomenon: See for example Pakir, Two Tongue Tied: Bilingualism in Singapore, *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development*, Vol. 14, No 1 & 2, 1995, pp. 73-90.

'traditional values'.[10] Functional communication becomes the domain of second language, while emotional and poetic use of language is emphasised in first language — in terms of African languages, this has sometimes been at the expense of developing communication skills for the world of work and communication beyond personal contexts. While assessment procedures should recognise that languages play different roles in people's lives, they should also extend the range of what is common. If we are serious about becoming a truly multilingual country, our assessment system should try to encourage cross-overs in the ways in which all our languages are used by speakers of those languages, whether they are speaking their first language or not.

It is in an attempt to answer some of the questions raised by these issues that the IEB is experimenting with generic language outcomes, and trying to express (and assess) them in ways which will accommodate a range of functions or contexts.

8 SHIFTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

In many respects, the process of trying to make NQF-compatible standards for ABET has held up a mirror to the practices in our field, and challenged us to examine many of the thoughts and beliefs which we have taken largely for granted.

In order to understand a bit more clearly how the Common Outcomes model challenges pre-existing thinking it is necessary to backtrack a little. In South African education, the majority of learners are put through a learning process which teaches them to read and write through the language they know best, their first language. At a point when the skills of reading and writing are thought to be acquired, the language of learning changes and becomes — generally — English. This model of bilingual education is known as a delayed immersion model, because the moment of having to survive in a new language is put off until the basic literacy skills of reading and writing are acquired. By and large, some version of the delayed immersion model has been used for adults too. Conventionally ABET Level 1 has been described as 'mother tongue': during this phase people with little or no formal educational experience, who can neither read or write, learn those skills in the language of learning they know best.

Once the 'breakthrough' has been made to reading and writing, then energy has usually been directed into learning English — generally as a language of communication — until a degree of proficiency has been reached which will accommodate the learning of intellectually demanding subjects through the medium of English. The first language is thus introduced, used for learning to read and write and then stopped. English is delayed until enliteration is underway, and only once it is established can any thought be given to dealing with some of the so-called content subjects.

It was really with this model as the default assumption in most people's minds that the standard-setting process was started for ABET. When we started with English for Communications and Mathematics outcomes for Level 3, we did not really disturb any existing thinking, because the assumption was that by this level the switch to English would have been made. When we set standards we did so with ABET learners in existing English language programmes in mind. In short, we were thinking of learners who were grappling with English as a second language, and perhaps, in deep rural areas, with English almost as a foreign language. Although one or two small voices were talking about the importance of *also* setting African language outcomes at Level 3, English was prioritised and such developments postponed.

When the IEB pilot was extended to Levels 1 & 2, we were forced to confront many of assumptions that we had taken for granted.

One assumption was that the conventional model of 'mother tongue Level 1' could be used to promote the worth of African languages, without really considering that perhaps for many people — because there was no further learning pathway for those languages — it was, in effect, a sort of learning dead end, even if it did speed up the learning-to-read-and-write process. We had pinned a number of hopes and beliefs on a particular model of adult education which was now having to be unpacked and examined.

Another issue that required rethinking was that of a learning continuum. In the conventional ABET model there would be no English language outcomes at Level 1 (with the possible exception of oral outcomes), because Level 1 was devoted to learning to read and write in the learner's first language. Although many learners may begin learning English orally in Level 1, they would only begin to apply reading and writing skills in English at Level 2. A lot of English learning would have to be packed into Level 2 for learners to be ready to go into Level 3. This would mean that either the Level 3 English 'second language' outcomes would have to be lowered, in which case they would not keep pace with demands made by other training or content learning at this level, or that the Level 2 phase would be 'bloated' in that, in terms of English, learners would start virtually from scratch and have to cover a lot of ground in order to reach Level 3. This factor in part led to the proposal that English too should have learning pathways through Levels 1, 2 and 3. As noted in Section 6, this does not mean that a learner will have to do the two Level 1 language courses at the same time. In fact, the idea is to recommend to learners that they do their first language Level 2 before progressing through the levels in other languages.

While this idea appealed to certain ABET practitioners, there were others who felt cautious. One fear was that the delayed immersion model, which at least gave learners a chance to learn reading and writing through their most familiar language, would be replaced by a demand for a model where learners were

expected to learn English *and* to read and write at the same time. If people had a learning pathway for English right from Level 1, they would simply bypass mother tongue literacy – whatever ground had been gained by African languages in ABET would be quickly lost.

Other aspects of the debate should also be noted. For example, experienced practitioners in the field of teaching people to read and write using the African languages argued that many of the outcomes which had been located at Level 3 for English could probably be reached at Level 2 or even 1 if learners were working in their own languages. This then gave rise to numerous arguments about why learners should only get a Level 2 certificate, say, in Sesotho, when the same outcomes would earn them a Level 3 certificate in English. This too was a major factor behind the proposal for common outcomes at the same levels across languages.

As seemed to be the case each time we thought we had found an answer, more questions arose. The common outcomes approach appeared to have some very positive reasons for being seriously considered, as well as some serious reasons for being critically examined. Positive reasons are that such a system proposes that languages will – in the formal sense within the NQF – be regarded as 'equal:'[11] all languages can be expected to do the 'same things', and learners may choose which languages to demonstrate their skills in. A common outcomes approach to South African languages will be very much easier to handle in a qualification system than one which sets different outcomes at different levels for different languages. It also appears to be a neat way of getting around the politically 'hot' distinction between first and second language, which has been so badly abused by the South African education system.

On the other hand, some of the best people in the field are understandably cautious of what this new model of the relationships between languages might bring. They are concerned that in the name of treating the languages equally, we might end up treating the learners themselves very unequally. They argue that from a teaching and learning point of view the understanding which we have of first and second language learning is really useful and helpful (in spite of the misuses to which these ideas were put), and they suggest that the insights that have been gained about learning a second language will be thrown out along with the terminology. They argue also that because the standards have been set with second language users in mind, many of the outcomes which one might reasonably expect from a first language learner are not properly represented, or occur very late on the learning continuum.

11 Clearly such an assumption is open to rigorous inspection. What if, as happened in the present case, the standards have been set in English, and have worked off English language literacy assumptions? What happens to other equally valid literacy or oracy practices which are *not* present in English? Can language be regarded as being on an equal footing when only the literacy practices associated with one of the languages has been taken into account? See also Section 7 of this paper.

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It is only by ongoing reflection on these issues that we will be able to discover whether the proposed Common Outcomes model has the potential to be a system which does not prejudice the abilities which first language learners can demonstrate, and also caters for the demands of learners coming to a new language.

9 THE BACKWASH EFFECT: HOW WILL THE ASSESSMENT MODEL IMPACT ON PROGRAMME, CURRICULUM AND TEACHING?

As discussed above, the Common Outcomes model implies a paradigm shift for everybody concerned with ABET. Careful and long-term exploration of the extent to which and ways in which such a model will impact on curriculum design, programme provision and teaching will be needed in order to evaluate the backwash effect of such an assessment model.

Some issues to consider here are:

- The Level 1 and 2 outcomes and the assessment tasks need to be evaluated to see whether they do promote broad and generalisable competencies that will not have a restrictive impact on curriculum and teaching. (At this point in the Levels 1 and 2 pilot, outcomes definitions and mock tasks have only been developed for the testing of reading and writing, and these only in terms of external assessment. The next phase of development will focus on options for internal assessment.)

- How will practitioners and learners perceive the 'relabelling' of level competencies? As noted in Section 8, the most familiar approach to literacy teaching has been mother tongue literacy followed by a gradual transition to second language. First language literacy acquisition usually resulted in fairly high competencies at the end of Level 1; written second language (usually English) skills would only begin to be acquired in Level 2. In the Common Outcomes model, the situation in a comparable time frame would be reversed; learners could achieve Level 2 or even 3 for their first language competencies, and Level 1 for their second language competencies. The Common Outcomes 'labelling' is in fact more logical than previous practice, as it recognises higher outcomes with a higher level label. However, there needs to be a lot of public discussion of these issues.

- Fears were expressed that lowering first language outcomes at Level 1 would result in even less provision of first language instruction than had been the case, as many providers did not offer tuition beyond what was commonly called 'Level 1' (equivalent to Level 2 in the pilot model). This implies, however, that providers would make the choice to cut the current time allocated to provision of first language literacy acquisition; in the new model

learners should be able to progress to Level 2 in first language through the levels of the Common Outcomes model within the same time frame that previously took them up to what was called Level 1. Second, it would imply that providers were not interested in learners achievement of sustainable literacy. It must be borne in mind that ABET Level 1 on the NQF is seen as roughly equivalent to Std 1 or Year 3 in the formal schooling sector, and nowhere in the world is this seen as a benchmark for the achievement of sustainable literacy. Again, this is an issue that requires much advocacy from the ABET sector. The Common Outcomes model is not incompatible with the notion that learners should acquire literacy through their first language before starting second language acquisition (with the option of continuing in their first language as well). Within the Common Outcomes model, the IEB would recommend that learners reach at least Level 2 in their first language before doing Level 1 in their second language.

At various workshops participants grappled with several other questions related to ways of *teaching* first and second languages, and the relationship of *assessment* to different teaching strategies in the Common Outcomes model. Some of the questions and some suggested answers were as follows.

- **What about oral assessment?**

Most second language programmes concentrate on developing learners' oral abilities in the early phases, whereas first language programmes concentrate on literacy development. How would these curriculum differences be reflected in the assessment model?

One possible answer to this question is that where learners are being assessed in their mother tongue, they should receive an automatic credit for the oral component at low levels – probably at least Levels 1 and 2. This is an example of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in practice.

At higher levels, where oral competencies would include higher order cognitive skills like debating and logical sequencing skills, all learners would be required to sit an oral exam, whether it is their first or second language.

The second phase of the Levels 1 and 2 pilot will include a focus on oral assessment as an aspect of internal assessment, and will need to take into account the different oral traditions in African languages, as well as the oral needs of learners of English and Afrikaans.

- **What about assessment of basic literacy skills?**

Basic literacy skills (recognition of and formation of letters of the alphabet, left-to-right orientation, knowing when to turn the page, etc.) are generally only taught in first language classes, at Level 1. If learners do English at Level 1 after completing first language Level 1, would they have to be assessed in these skills for the second time?

The answer here is: no. No assessment (whether learners are first language or second language speakers) will ever test in a discrete way whether or not learners are able to form letters of the alphabet, to move their eyes (or their pen) from left to right across the page, or to turn the page when they get to the bottom right hand corner. But if learners are unable to do these things, they surely will not be able to do the higher order things that will be required of them at Level 1, such as reading and writing whole sentences. (In a competency-based assessment process, learners are tested in generic competencies, or 'clusters' of skills.)

- **What about grammar and vocabulary development?**

Surely first language learners should be expected to use and recognise a wider range of vocabulary than second language learners? Surely second language learners need texts with much simpler sentence construction?

Yes — but this does not mean that the vocabulary/grammar in *language assessments* should differ in levels of difficulty according to whether the language is the learners' mother tongue or not. It simply means that first language learners will progress much faster through the system than second language learners.

10 CONCLUSION

10.1 IEB's decision to experiment with the Common Outcomes model in the Levels 1 and 2 pilot

The process of consultation through the regional workshops and subsequent discussions raised many complex issues and controversies. At some point, the IEB had to make an operational decision on its approach to language assessment. No consensus was reached on any of the models in the various consultation processes, and there came a time at which the IEB had to decide on a framework within which to develop outcomes and their assessment tasks in order to have a 'product' to pilot. The IEB does not view the development of a pilot exam as the end of the consultation process — indeed, we see it as one vital stage in an ongoing participatory process of standard setting. The provision of a concrete set of outcomes and examinations to which people can respond will move debates forward, and illuminate implications for practice.

The IEB decided to experiment with the Common Outcomes model in the pilot for the following reasons:

- We believe this is the only way to remove the debate out of an academic realm and into the real world of teachers and learners. Our rationale for experimenting with this model is to enable all stakeholders to participate fully in the debate.
- We do not feel that the most commonly used model of current literacy practices promotes the status of African languages. What has been variously

termed 'the conventional model' or the 'gradual transition model' recognised the value of using the learners first language for initial literacy as a scaffolding for the acquisition of second language, usually English, which was then promoted as the dominant discourse. (This is an example of what is often termed 'subtractive bilingualism'.[12]) The Common Outcomes model opens up possibilities of developing African languages as subjects in their own right throughout the levels framework.

- To pilot within the old model seemed to us to be ignoring the vigorous debates on the same issues going on in the formal schooling sector, and in other language policy arenas.
- The model will help us to make a much-needed distinction between 'language' as a subject, and 'language' as a medium of learning, and to develop a way of defining *subject* outcomes (e.g. social studies, health, etc.) without reference to learners' *language* (especially English) abilities.
- The 'relabelling' of language outcomes for ABET in the Common Outcomes model is likely to be more logical in relation to the proposed workings of the NQF.
- Most importantly, many of the vital questions raised in the debates that have been taking place can only be answered through empirical research in the sense of implementing the model, and monitoring its impact on practice.

It may well be that we have to reassess some of these positions as the pilot process unfolds. In this respect we will be very dependent on informed feedback from users as well as our own research and evaluation processes. Furthermore, as we noted at the beginning of this paper, long-term developments will be in line with the workings of SAQA and the NQF.

10.2 The pilot process so far

To conclude this paper, a brief summary of the implementation phase of the pilot process so far is given:

- Mock exams based on workshopped outcomes for Levels 1 and 2 were set in English and translated into other languages by translation agencies and practitioners. The exams were trialled with learners, and a marking workshop was held. Unfortunately, there were various problems in the translations, especially where literal translations were given where interpretations of sense and intention were required, and in relation to issues of regional language variety. (It should be noted here that translation of exams is not an inherent feature of the Common Outcomes model, and this part of the process will be modified for future exams.)

12 See, for example, Luckett in *SA Journal of Applied Language Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, May 1993, pp. 38-60.

- The outcomes, the Mock Exams in four languages, and the marking memorandum were collated into a 'Mock Exam Pack' at both levels, now available from the IEB.
- The Pilot Exams for testing reading and writing at Levels 1 and 2, to be held in November, will be set in an African language to the Levels 1 and 2 outcomes. These will be translated into the other ten South African languages, and a language moderation workshop will be held, in which a linguistically representative group of ABE practitioners will make amendments to the translations where necessary. These language moderators will have freedom to change whole exercises (not just to improve the translations) if they feel this is necessary.[13]
- Plans for evaluating this phase of the pilot include
  - monitoring translation issues;
  - exploring other options for setting examinations to common outcomes in different languages while maintaining equivalence of assessment standards;
  - commissioning critiques on the models debate;
  - setting up user feedback mechanisms for the pilot, involving learners, teachers and providers;
  - extending our theoretical framework by exploring issues such as Cummins and Swains notion of the relation between context-reduced/context-embedded and cognitively demanding/cognitively undemanding assessment in first and second language.[14]
- The second phase of the pilot will focus on internal assessment procedures, including oral assessment. This phase will be implemented in 1996.

Through the process of ongoing consultation, we hope to develop a shared long-term vision for an educationally and ideologically sound assessment model for all levels of ABET in the future.

13 At the time of publication of this paper, the November examinations have been written and marked. Analysis of the results will be part of an evaluation of the LEvels 1 & 2 Pilot.

14 Cummins & Swain: *Bilingualism in Education*, Longman, New York, 1986.

APPENDIX 1

LEVEL 1: CORE READING PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Range statement

Learners will be required to read a text of up to 120 words on a familiar topic, coming from everyday sources such as:

> simple forms, personal letters, written instructions, product labels, street signs, slips, medicine bottles, notices, stories, advertisements, dialogues, calendars, simple linear timetables (e.g. wedding and funeral programmes), lists.

The candidate should be able to

a) respond to everyday signs, symbols, and other text types, e.g. street signs, shop signs, labels, warnings, simple adverts, simple forms, lists

b) read, interpret and follow simple instructions

c) read a simple paragraph aloud with fluency and clarity (to be tested in oral exam)

d) show literal understanding of a text (e.g. by answering Y/N questions, ticking T/F statements, filling in gaps, choosing an appropriate word from a box, matching words to pictures, etc.)

e) work out the main purpose of a simple text, who it is written for, and who has written it (e.g. a street name, an advertisement, a newspaper headline)

f) use clues such as titles, format, punctuation and illustrations to help understand the text

g) relate the ideas in the text to own experience or knowledge (e.g. by writing a simple sentence)

h) give an opinion on a text and give a reason for that opinion (e.g. by ticking agree/disagree boxes or writing a simple sentence; or by giving oral answers in an oral exam)

i) work out if there is any missing information or if there are any untruths in a simple text

j) understand the ways we organise everyday information according to time, order of events, or other logical order

k) interpret pictures (clear line drawings or photographs) around a familiar theme.

LEVEL 1: CORE WRITING PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Range statement

The candidate will be required to write single words or up to five sentences, with guidance in the form of pictures or dictated text. The context will relate to everyday life.

The candidate should be able to

a) write own name, address and todays date for practical purposes (e.g. a letter, a form)

b) write single words appropriate to a given task (e.g. write a shopping list, fill in single words missing from a text, label a picture, fill in a simple form)

c) write simple sentences on a familiar topic

d) use capital letters appropriately for names and initial word in sentence

e) write down something heard, word for word, using capital letters appropriately, with a reasonable sound-symbol correspondence

f) show comprehension of a reading text by giving a written response (e.g. answering questions, gap-filling, etc.).

LEVEL 2: CORE READING PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Range statement

The candidate will be required to read a simple text of up to 300 words within a familiar context, from everyday sources such as:

magazine or newspaper articles (language level simplified), formal and personal letters, everyday forms, written instructions, medicine labels, telephone messages, notices, agendas, advertisements, accounts, ATMs, stories, dialogues, maps (e.g. simple street maps and outline of SA), timetables, calendar, telephone directory, content pages, simple tables (e.g. class registers).

The candidate should be able to

a) respond to everyday signs, symbols and other text types, e.g. street signs, shop signs, labels, warnings, simple advertisements, written instructions, forms

b) read, interpret and follow simple instructions

c) read and respond to a simple text (by for example answering literal comprehension questions or expressing main ideas)

d) work out the main purpose of a simple text, who it is written for, and who has written it

e) use strategies such as skimming, scanning, reading for detail, guessing words from context, predicting what is going to happen next

f) use clues such as chapter headings, titles, layout, format, punctuation, illustrations, etc. to help understand the text

g) relate the ideas in the text to own experience or knowledge

h) give an opinion on a text and a reason for that opinion

i) work out if there seems to be any missing information or untruths in a simple text

j) identify less obvious meanings which are not directly stated in the text (by e.g. making comparisons; matching words with words of similar meaning; inferring meaning)

k) extract information from and respond to visual texts such as pictures, simple graphs/tables, maps, book covers, etc.

l) understand the structure of a text, e.g. by putting headings to paragraphs; finding an article in a magazine by using the contents page

m) understand the ways we organise everyday information according to time, order of events, or other logical order (e.g. by doing a gapfill exercise using words like AND, BUT, OR, SO, THEN, BEFORE, AFTER)

n) use referencing skills to access information, e.g. alphabetical order (class register, vocabulary books, telephone directory); numerical order (calendar); categories (e.g. contents pages).

LEVEL 2: CORE WRITING PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Range statement

The candidate will be required to write up to one paragraph, with guidance in the form of pictures or a read text. The sentences in the paragraph should be logically ordered and coherently linked. The context will be related to everyday life.

The candidate should be able to

a) carry out simple everyday writing tasks, recognising the need to produce different kinds of text according to context, and taking into account who the readers are:
   - narrative and descriptive texts, e.g. stories
   - persuasive texts, e.g. stating personal opinions
   - social texts, e.g. personal letter, instructions, notes, postcards, postal orders, bank forms, shopping lists, telephone messages
   - texts required by learning situations, e.g. gapfills

b) use full stops and capital letters appropriately

c) demonstrate sufficient knowledge and control of the vocabulary, grammatical structures and spelling that the writing can be easily understood

d) use writing to remember, plan and organise activities

e) structure the writing logically and coherently within a paragraph

f) demonstrate knowledge and control of various ways of organising text (headings, simple numbering, letter format, message format, etc.)

g) plan, draft, edit and rewrite her/his work in an effort to make the writing clear.

ISSUES RAISED IN PLENARY: SUMMARY

Conference participants

Outcomes-based education and training (OBET): Discussion points

- It was suggested that a heuristic (discovery-oriented) approach should be taken to OBET. Outcomes should be broadly defined, and used to help give direction for curriculum and teaching. Outcomes should not be pre-specified in great detail, thereby blocking off unpredictable learnings that could take place.
- OBET appears to be driven by experts, and there are fears that its transformative features will not get processed or acted upon by teachers. OBET is closely linked to new practices around assessment, and generally demands highly skilled assessors. Assessment-led reform must therefore take place in the context of teacher education.

Assessment and curriculum: Discussion points

- There is always a tension between assessment and education in that a lot of learning is not observable, but assessment is based on the idea of measuring observable behaviours. Education is a process, while assessment is linked to the notion of a product. However, new forms of assessment aim at trying to assess process as well as performance; process itself becomes the outcome (the required product) to be assessed. For example, if problem solving is a learning outcome, it is not the solution to the problem that is assessed as the outcome. Rather, it is evidence of the process undertaken that is assessed as the outcome. The role of continuous and internal assessment is important here.
- Assessment can serve both to illustrate and influence teaching methodology. Developing an assessment model can be seen as a way of doing curriculum change. There is a need for more case studies on how assessment affects teaching practice and curriculum.
- It was often commented that curriculum and assessment issues cannot be divorced. In relation to assessment design, decisions on questions such as what do you want to assess, why do you want to assess this, and how are you going to assess this will all have curricular impact. In relation to curriculum development, assessment decisions are closely linked to the approaches and goals informing a course.

- In contrast to this view, some people felt that South African educational thinking was too bound to a curriculum-based approach. It was noted that the distinction made in the standards-setting process between input (curriculum) and outcomes (standards) was not discussed in any depth at the conference, and that there were different ways of looking at the relations between curriculum, assessment and standards. There is an argument that says that in the standards-setting process the focus should move from thinking about how we teach (input) to thinking about the desired results (outputs), regardless of the range of curricula and teaching methodologies that may lead to these results.

Language education: Discussion points

- A language education system as outlined in the Eltic paper has numerous implications for implementation. Some conference participants felt that it was unrealistic to expect teachers to reorganise their teaching practice in ways implied by the proposal, and that such a system would place unacceptable pressures on teachers. In response to this the speakers made the following points:
  - While a new approach does pose problems for schools, we need to seriously consider ways of restructuring school management. Multilingual and multilevel language classes are school management issues in terms of timetabling and resource sharing. If the school itself were to be seen as a unit of organisation, guidelines for managing changing practices could be developed.
  - Lock-stepping learners into a system which assumes that everyone is at the same level is artificial. The reality is that classrooms are full of learners with different language abilities, and practices for dealing with these are emerging in schools. We need to learn from these practices and integrate them into our teacher training programmes.
  - The current teacher training systems are wasteful in any case, restructuring pre- and in-service teacher training could help address some of these issues.
- Because materials are often the only or the main resource that teachers come into contact with, it was suggested that materials development be the prime means of changing teacher practice. In response to this it was noted that materials are always mediated, and that good materials are often used badly, while a good teacher can make creative use of bad materials. Materials development should not be seen as a quick fix for the transformation of education.
- Language education has become a field in which many different methodologies and approaches compete. This serves to illustrate the

complexity of the debates, and ways in which language issues underpin numerous other aspects of the education and training debate. Some people felt that the diversity of approaches in language education should not be seen as a problem but as a strength in the field.

- How will national standards for language take into account regional varieties of language, in terms of both the assessment of learners and the practices of teachers? One response to this was that the system should be flexible enough to allow for variety, and that an ability to understand and manipulate regional language variations could be seen as a useful outcome.

Language paradigms: Discussion points

- The model of language acquisition on which any approach is based should be made explicit. The separation between first language and second language acquisition is based on a positivist construct of language; in an interactionist model the distinction becomes more blurred.
- Issues related to first and second language teaching approaches must be studied in the context of practice. In school situations the first and second language divide is rapidly breaking down in the context of multilingual classrooms. Proposals need to be tried out in practice, and both the theory and the implementation issues can be discussed by researchers, teachers and learners.

The National Qualifications Framework: Discussion points

- Some people feared that the NQF would become a political construct understood only by a few. Even though consultation might take place, it would be within a framework determined by specialists who had developed their own understandings of the system. The most marginalised groups would again be voiceless.
- There were questions around the notion of the General Education Certificate (GEC) being an 'exit point' and composite certificate. Would this be a block to progress for an individual who did not want to do the required GEC subjects, but did want to continue beyond ABET 4 (GEC Level 1) in, for example, an African language? In response to this, it was noted that the principles of open access and recognition of prior learning (RPL) meant that any learner could enter the system *wherever they chose to*, and try for a credit without pre-requirements. The GEC was not meant to be a barrier that prevented learners from accumulating credits at higher levels if they were able to do so.
- Concerns were expressed over the issue of learning pathways. If the NQF offered the possibility of accumulating different credits in different subjects

at different times, this implied a subject-based framework. What happened to the emerging movement towards curricula based on integrated subject domains? In response, it was noted that this could be a matter for contestation. One solution might be that there could be standards for integrated studies as well as for single subjects, and people could have the option between one route or another.

- The need for informing teachers about the NQF debates, and providing support for the implementation of OBET, was stressed many times.
- It was commented that implementation of the NQF would surely be a costly exercise, given the need for information services, teacher training, resources and materials for new approaches and so on. Where was the money to come from, and could the country afford it? In response it was noted that different sectors would have to contribute, and that education transformation in any case implied restructuring the management of resources.

SUMMING UP

DRAWING THE ISSUES TOGETHER: IN THE CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY

Neville Alexander

Praesa

- Outcomes and competencies need to be defined *broadly* if the transformative intent of the NQF is to be achieved. Too tight a specification of outcomes can limit or even negate the exploratory nature of the education process.
- More attention needs to be given to the conceptualisation of the NQF so that the system itself does not become too rigid.
- The relationship between assessment and the curriculum needs to be explored further. Competencies have to be contextualised, and assessment has to be part of a teaching strategy.
- The first language/second language debate is complex. It must be stressed that the common outcomes model accepts that methods and curricula may be different for first or second language learners. There is still some conceptual confusion on the processes of setting standards for language from an output point of view, and curriculum issues relating to the different idiomatic and historic bases of each language.
- The question of whether outcomes are based on a first or second language paradigm needs to be explored. Ideally they should be based on a first language paradigm.
- Consensus around the common outcomes model hinges on the proviso that flexible credit accumulation and recognition of prior learning can happen.
- The central issue around the common outcomes model is noted in the paper by Witthaus and King:

  If the primary rationale for the Common Outcomes model is that it will promote languages that are at present disadvantaged by according them

equal treatment in assessment, one must be sure that this is indeed the consequence of such a model.

To find this out, the implications of the model need to be explored in practice.

- The concept of separate certificates for different domain competencies for speaking and listening, reading and writing is interesting in that it valorises the use and knowledge of many languages for different purposes.
- The movement in language use from BICS (basic interpersonal communicating skills) to CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) should inform what we are trying to do when outcomes are developed. By using the Cummins hypothesis explicitly in order to calibrate levels and standards for L1, we would be able to determine with some precision the degree of approximation of the L2 learner to native proficiency. Of course, these competencies will be inferred from actual performance in the form of receptive and productive speech/writing tasks at each level.
- The development of the IEB outcomes for ABET are a good example of a possible standards-setting process.

SUMMING UP

DRAWING THE ISSUES TOGETHER: IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NQF

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General comments on the NQF

- The NQF is a political construct, and we must expect some political manoeuvring around its creation.
- The NQF is an attempt at national work; at the same time however we all make our arguments from different perspectives, and there will be difficulty in drawing all these perspectives together. One area of discourse confusion is that people often talk in different modes; these get conflated in ways that hinder the development of shared understandings. Some of these modes are:
  - the conceptual/theoretical mode (terminological and expert debates);
  - the political mode (how will decision making be shared between ministries and departments; dynamics between provincial and national);
  - and the functional/operational mode (how will the system be implemented; what should course designers be doing now; teachers concerns about how the system will affect their practice).
- One of the endemic misconceptions around the NQF is the perception that it will lead to a 'lowering of standards' because of the open access features. This is based on an incomplete view of assessment-led education: while it does imply opening up access at entry and loosening up options in respect of delivery and time frames, it also involves the setting of desirable standards at exit points.
- The NQF will have a huge impact, because it can be seen in practice how formal assessment changes learner roles.
- In setting language outcomes for the NQF, an awareness of the tensions between the public and private domains of language use should be built in.

Background to the development of the NQF

- The policy discourse around the NQF originated in the Further Education sector, and was primarily driven by labour and employers — that is, the focus was work-related skills and training, and redistribution of access.
- The debate was also driven by costs and economics in the sense that the training and ABET sectors are not state funded.
- In this sector one of the main issues was a debate around what counted as competence. The main idea was that competence must be linked to *flexibility* as a key skill in the workplace. Skills and competence were seen as linked to a hierarchy as follows:
  - Routine skills;
  - Managing routine;
  - Contingency management: prediction, prevention, and dealing with the unexpected;
  - Role/job environment: interaction with people, texts and contexts, etc.
- Traditional versions of competence stated specific performance results, and therefore did not encompass notions of flexibility and the unpredictable.

Some comments on proposed details of the NQF

- The basic building blocks of the NQF are units of learning, which combine to make up a qualification. These are expressed in terms of outcomes which are described in terms of *capability* (linked to the free floating generic abilities which are seen to underpin education and training). This was done in order to foreground transferable abilities rather than simply focus on job skills or tasks. It is accepted however that abilities always need to be content and context-related.
- At qualification level, units from three categories should be combined: foundational, contextual and specialisation. The argument here is that this integration has to be compelled in order to link underpinning skills with the training-specific skills that happen in the area of specialisation.
- Language enters into qualifications at two different levels: (i) communication is seen as one of the generic abilities, and language is therefore linked to every capability; (ii) language is a foundational unit.

Conclusion

Most people are agreed that education and training are in need of transformation. The NQF has the potential to do this. However, the NQF cannot deliver total conceptual clarity to suit everyones agenda; various domains of education and

training and the institutions linked to these domains have been in a state of confusion for years. Like any other attempt at systemic change, the NQF will evolve over time and through practice.

PLENARY: CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Chaired by Khetsi Lehoko

Department of Education

In conclusion, it was stated that the conference was a contribution to the transformation of education and training, and illuminated many of the issues which *inter alia* the Departments of Education, are grappling with. There were, however, some concerns regarding the debates raised during the conference *inter alia*:

- How could all these debates be fed into a central point so that sectors and stakeholders were not talking past each other, but were sharing concerns and solutions?
- These debates also needed to be taken to those who were most immediately affected by them, the teachers and learners.
- Interim standards for ABET had already been published, and these now needed to be translated into curriculum.

It was proposed that there should be a way forward beyond the conference, and that people involved in the language field should organise themselves to further these debates. The setting up of a steering committee from those attending the conference was suggested. After some discussion this idea was dropped as there was no clarity or agreement on what this steering committee would do. It was felt that the debates should go into properly constituted fora such as Ministry-appointed task teams or committees.

It was emphasized that the IEBs goal in setting up the conference had been very open-ended; the idea was not to reach any conclusions or make any policy proposals, but simply to draw together people from different sectors in order to discuss perspectives on language and the NQF. The IEB took the view that putting ideas into operation was one way of furthering debate, as practice often generated new knowledge. The IEB would be pleased if organisations or individuals took up some of the research challenges in the IEBs work, as the IEB itself did not have the capacity for in-depth research and evaluation.

A proposal was made from the floor that information on concrete projects linked to the development of language standards should be shared. It was suggested that brief narratives on any relevant projects could be included in the conference proceedings. People were asked to send information to M. King of the IEB.

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Key features of the proposed National Qualifications Framework (NQF), together with the striving for curriculum renewal, pose a range of tough challenges around the structuring of the assessment of language development.

The aim of the conference was to explore language policy in relation to the NQF proposals and their implications for implementation of language education for schooling, ABE and training. The conference was not seen in any way as a policy-setting event, but as a platform for opening up informed debate on language and the NQF.

Issues discussed in these proceedings include competency based education and training; standards and levels in language assessment; and an approach to language assessment in ABET.

Papers published in the proceedings are discussion documents rather than formal academic papers. Points raised from the floor in plenary have also been recorded in the form of thematic categories. These include outcomes-based education and training; assessment and curriculum; language education; language paradigms; and the National Qualifications Framework.

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